

THE SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION

Derrick Nabarro's first novel, *The Rod of Anger*, published this year, *The Times* said: 'It is undoubtedly a thriller yet it is a more thoughtful reflection of reality than most novels of action and adventure. It is for his clear ability to think as well as feel that this novel is particularly promising.'

This new story is set in Eastern Germany. Across the city-divided border between East and West slipped the British agent, Graner, guided by his underground contact, Willi Rummel. Graner had instructions to organize the flight to England of Morris, a British traitor; but the moment was far from opportune, for Morris was then being used as bait in a government plot to trap Willi and his father, Mayor of Heisenach. Into this perilous snare (behind which lay plans on which depended the continued existence of Communist control) walked Graner. Soon he too was pitting his brains against the ruthless calculations of the police state.

ALSO BY DERRICK NABARRO

Wait for the Dawn

The Rod of Anger

THE SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION

by

DERRICK NABARRO



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CHAPTER ONE

THE house stood alone behind wrought-iron gates in a walled acre of well-laid garden.

Granger pushed the gate open and walked slowly along the gravel path to the doorway, pressed for a moment the bell-push, then stood back and looked around the Greek-fashion pillars to the net curtains veiling the wide windows. As he pressed the bell again, the door opened.

'I have an appointment with Mrs. Morris for three o'clock,' Granger said.

'Your name, please?' asked a grey-haired woman with faded eyes and a sad expression.

'Granger. John Granger.'

'Please come in. My sister's expecting you,' she said.

The hall smelled of fresh polish and old furniture.

'Give me your hat, young man,' said the aunt. 'My sister is in the lounge. Go straight in. She saw you walk up the path.'

'Thank you. . . .'

'And tell my sister I'll bring the tea later.'

Granger smiled down at her, then said: 'That's very kind of you.'

'Yes, yes. Now go straight in.'

Margaret Morris sat in a hard-backed chair facing the wide windows. She wore a black dress without ornament, except for a brooch at her throat.

'You have no connections with the newspapers?'

'None,' said Granger.

'Please sit down then.'

'Thank you.'

'You have news of my son?'

'Not exactly news.'

'Then you are here under false pretences.'

Granger hesitated, then answered: 'I don't want to raise your hopes.'

'Since my son disappeared, I have listened to many stories. One more—'

'Your son wishes to return.'

'Then you know where he is?'

'Eastern Europe.'

She fingered the brooch at her throat. 'I don't believe you.'

Granger looked at the taut, brittle old lady, felt her helpless anger and suffered with her.

'I'm not here to judge your son. If he wants to return, someone must help him.'

'Return! Return? What to? An angry mob who have condemned him in his absence?'

'The decision to return is his.'

'Why do you tell me this?'

'I need your help,' said Granger.

'My help?'

'He can't distinguish between someone who can be trusted and someone who is pretending.' She looked at the sky through the net curtains and thought of an innocent-eyed, small boy grown overnight into manhood. Granger stood up.

'Do you think it will be easy getting him back? Do you think people will fall over themselves to help when his own mother makes difficulties?'

'I think you have said enough.'

'Where did you buy that brooch?'

For the first time she faltered. 'This?' she asked. Her fingers trembled at her throat. 'He gave it to me.'

'Would he recognize it?'

'It was his last gift.'

Granger held out his hand. 'Can I have it?'

She closed her eyes. Her fingers searched clumsily for the catch. It opened and the pin slid out of the black material and shone thin and bright for a moment in the slanting sunlight. 'Take it and go, quickly.' She placed it carefully on the table. 'Take it quickly. Take everything. . . .' She watched his hand swallow up the brooch—a strong, broad, yet small hand.

'No. Stay,' she said. 'What else do you want to know?'

'Did he ever mention a man called Willi Rummel?'

'Is that an English name?'

'Willi Rummel helps people across frontiers—for a consideration.'

She shook her head. 'He never mentioned that name to me.'

'He told you nothing before he left?' asked Granger.

She shook her head from side to side.

'No apparently aimless observations about life in general?' he asked.

She opened her eyes wide. 'Did you know my son?'

'I know myself,' said Granger.

'He said a good man can be a bad citizen.'

Granger nodded. 'Does his wife know anything?'

'She hates me!'

'She blames you?'

'She won't even let me help her first child—a baby boy.'

'Hasn't he deserted both of you?'

'The night Brian disappeared, he arranged to meet his wife. She waited, but he didn't turn up. I can understand her attitude. Everyone does; but no one sees his point of view.'

'It is difficult.'

'Don't you see—he had to put the security people off the trail.'

'Was he an only child?'

'He had two sisters and a younger brother. They all idolized him.'

'Where does his wife live?'

'She won't see you!'

'Does she still love him?'

'I don't know. She was with child when he left her behind.'

'Were they happy?'

'Good sons make good husbands.'

A tea tray rattled in the hall and the aunt backed open the lounge door. Granger touched the brooch in his pocket.

'You must talk to no one,' he said.

'The only person I want to talk to is my daughter-in-law.'

'We asked her to live here,' said the aunt, arranging cups and saucers.

'I can find my own way out,' said Granger.

'But I've brought three cups,' said the aunt.

'I must hurry,' said Granger.

'Goodbye, Mr. Granger,' said Mrs. Morris, 'and good luck.'

'Your hat's on the hall table,' said the aunt. As soon as she heard the front door close, she said: 'How very fortunate he didn't stay. We've only six lumps of sugar until to-morrow's delivery.'

Two hours later, Granger swung the steering wheel round, nosed his car into the narrow drive of a small country cottage and breathed in the pure evening air. Home! Long shadows from the orchard at the foot of the garden crept over the lawn towards the back porch. A wash of kids' clothes, turned crimson in the evening sunlight, drooped from the line tied between two pear trees. The back door stood open.

'Hello! Anybody home?' called Granger. He could sense that Anna, his wife, was about. When the place was empty the walls threw his voice back into his face. She hurried into the kitchen.

'Ssh!' she whispered. 'They've just got off to sleep.' Then they kissed each other.

'You're earlier than you said,' she laughed.

'Any trouble?' he asked.

'I told Tom you were going away to earn some money to buy him a pedal car.' He kissed her again.

'I must arrange that to-morrow.'

'Won't it wait until you come back?'

'Yes, of course.'

'You don't sound very convincing.'

'What's to eat? Smells good.'

'Salad doesn't smell.'

'I'm still hungry.'

'Well, dinner's waiting in the dining-room.'

'I suppose I need a wash?'

Five minutes later they sat down in a cool room at a dark-oak refectory table covered with a white lace tablecloth.

'How long will you be away?' she asked, serving crisp lettuce with all the trimmings.

'A week or two.'

'You're looking forward to it, aren't you?'

'It pays well.'

'I could economize if that's the only reason.'

'I'd rather stay at home with you and the kids.'

'Why go, then?'

'Silly, isn't it?'

'Tell me.'

'You know why as well as I do.'

'Tell me a story, Daddy!' she mimicked, 'about how you scored the winning goal and broke your leg, Daddy!'

'You know me,' he said. 'I can't say "why should I take the risk—let one of the others".'

They picked at their food in silence for a while.

At last Anna said: 'I suppose you're the nearest to this particular ball.'

'I shan't break my leg again. My playing days are over! I'll be on the touchline.'

They drank white wine chilled in the new refrigerator, then a port which was too cheap to be good for anything but alcoholic content.

'What'll you do while I'm away?'

'Work so hard that time flies, be extra nice to Tom and Gail, spoil them, I suppose, and hope they spoil me.'

'They look healthy and they're happy.'

'What time do you leave in the morning?'

'Eight o'clock from London Airport.'

'I've packed your bag.'

'You're an angel.'

They sat through another long, painful silence.

'Strange,' she said, 'feeling like this after seven years of marriage.'

'I suppose it sounds trite saying you only value a thing truly when you are in danger of losing it.'

'I never take you for granted,' she said, and laughed.

He left his food and kissed her, then said: 'Have another drink!'

Before going to bed, they fed the new baby, then stood over the sleeping boy, looking down at his calm, innocent face. As he walked out of the room Granger wondered if he was very much better than Morris.

The following morning, rising before the children were awake, Granger forced down a huge breakfast.

'Open this after I've gone,' he said, and handed Anna a small parcel. He left quickly before the emotion in his throat reached his eyes.

He drove to the airport with brutal concentration on his driving. With five minutes to spare he left the reception desk and walked across the cosmopolitan assembly hall, his mind still disorganized by thoughts of his family.

Once the engines had throttled back to normal climbing speed, Granger closed his eyes and thought about the immediate future.

'A car will meet you as you touch down. The driver will take you to a café where you will meet Willi Rummel. You'll recognize him by the black patch over his right eye. With luck you'll be back in two days, with our friend Morris.'

'I'll be back!' thought Granger.

Granger heard a voice speaking in German.

'We're here,' it said. He opened his eyes and shivered. He looked through the car window and saw a cobbled road filthy with cattle dirt and flanked with drab village shops and cottages. He rubbed his eyes and the stubble on his chin, then looked at the driver.

'Thanks,' he said, 'I slept well.'

'I leave you here,' said the driver.

Granger sat quietly, glanced at the café across the dusty pavement, then shrugged his shoulders. 'What time is it?' he asked.

'Seven o'clock. It will be dark by half-past nine. I have a long drive back.'

Granger opened the door and stepped out. 'Thank you,' he said.

'Good luck, friend,' said the driver. Granger watched the big grey saloon bounce and sway to the corner, then disappear. Let's get this over, he thought. The sooner it's done, the sooner I go home.

The café was small, clean and empty save for one man with a patch over his right eye, sitting hunch-backed over two glasses and a half-empty bottle of Schnapps. His forearms rested flat on the table. He stared morosely at a tattered picture magazine.

'Sorry I'm late,' said Granger.

Willi Rummel turned round, his one good eye staring straight at the bridge of Granger's nose.

'Talking to me?' he asked. A shiny, transparent scar ran from

the corner of the black patch, across his temple, and gave his right eyebrow a five degree upward tilt. His good eye was large and steady and blue.

'Willi Rummel?' asked Granger, as he sat down.

'Have a drink,' said Willi, and three-quarters filled both tumblers.

'Is that wise?' asked Granger.

'Wise!' flared Willi. 'What the hell! Drink it!'

Granger reached across the table and gripped Willi's wrist.

'You've a job to do to-night,' he said, his voice low and even. Willi felt the strength in Granger's grip suddenly turned off.

'We don't want to quarrel,' said Granger.

'Don't we?' asked Willi, flushing.

'You can drink yourself stupid afterwards,' said Granger.

A door opened behind the bar.

'Get the hell out of here,' shouted Willi at the small, fat, baldheaded barman. A door closed noisily.

'What time do we leave?' asked Granger.

'As soon as it is dark.' Willi poured half his drink back into the bottle. 'You're right. I'm being a bloody fool, but what man is wise when . . . ' His voice trailed off.

'When what?' asked Granger.

'None of your bloody business. Be satisfied with being right.'

Granger shrugged his shoulders. He lifted his glass. 'Success,' he said, sipped, then added: 'I'm hungry.'

'Barman!' shouted Willi. The door opened softly. 'Food,' shouted Willi, 'for both of us. And we've not got all night!' The door closed again. Willi accidentally brushed the magazine on to the floor.

'Blast!' he said.

'Has your anger and frustration anything to do . . . '

'Who's frustrated?' snapped Willi.

'Has it anything to do with our job together?'

'Don't worry about your life,' said Willi, 'that'll be safe enough. I'm not troubled by frontier guards. I can handle men. . . . ' Granger laughed.

'So!' said Willi.

'I might have known,' Granger said. 'I have woman trouble too.'

'You have?'

'My wife,' said Granger.

'Your wife . . . you are lucky.'

'Lucky?' said Granger, 'when she might be left with two children to care for?'

'You have at least slept with the woman you love—at least I imagine you love her!' Granger waited patiently. A gentle expression softened the lines on Willi's face. 'She's as fair and graceful as a hillside of corn swaying in the summer wind . . . as pure as snow and as contrary as a mule!' he said.

The kitchen door opened and the landlord hurried in balancing a tray of mashed potatoes all white and steaming, sauerkraut and boiled bacon. He gave Willi a tentative smile ruined by nerves, slid the tray on to the table, then withdrew quickly.

'They're very clean here,' said Granger, lifting a shining white plate. 'This is fit for a General's inspection.'

'You should see Gerda's kitchen.'

'Gerda?'

'The cause of my "frustration".'

'Can I help?'

'Only her father, Herr Graf, can help and he's in prison.'

'What for?'

'For being a bloody fool.'

'You should talk!'

'I do it for the money, not for Western democracy or the greater Reich. I lost an eye for the Reich. Once bitten . . .'

They ate for a while, then Granger asked: 'What's it like across the line?'

'Like?' asked Willi, seriously. 'Like Hell's Kitchen with all the evil spirits let loose.'

'As bad as that.'

'Herlich, the Prime Minister, is dying. Beradin never leaves the bedside.'

'Beradin?'

'Head of the secret police.'

'And that's what we're walking into,' said Granger.

'You can still turn back,' said Willi, and stuffed a roll of boiled bacon into his mouth.

CHAPTER TWO

HERLICH lay thin and pale on his deathbed. The force of gravity pulled his eyeballs deep into their sockets, pulled the flesh down from the cheekbones, drew his jaw into the parchment of his throat and left the bone structure of his skull jutting out like a rock bared by the ebb tide. Eyes that had once been lively with cunning were small and dull and stared endlessly as if unaware of the man sitting by his side. 'I am here,' said Beradin once more. 'It is I, Beradin,' and leant forward to monopolize Herlich's eyes should they look around.

Herlich's lips moved. A sound escaped. Beradin leant closer, but he could neither understand nor even guess at the meaning. He put an arm round Herlich's shoulders and lifted him higher on his pillow. 'Am I going to die—am I?' Herlich whispered in a frail voice.

'The scientists will cure you,' said Beradin. Herlich raised his eyes slowly and looked up into Beradin's dark features. His voice cleared and he spoke in a whisper.

'I'm afraid,' he said. 'Don't leave me alone, Beradin. The shadows encroach. I see them in the corners, waiting. I watch them in the lonely hours. They hide in patient ambush.' His cold fingers gripped Beradin's wrist. 'Switch on more lights, more powerful lights.'

'The living are the ones I fear,' said Beradin.

'No,' said Herlich. 'Those shadows conceal the dead, or the black pit of unbeing.' Beradin saw fear in the eye of the man he had followed for a lifetime. He felt some of the fear seep into his own chest. His heart stumbled, then beat faster.

'Be strong,' he said, his voice thick. 'If you pray for eternal life now, our achievement becomes a hideous crime. Remember our aims, to wrest from a hostile universe the only real security for man, to seize and develop the chance of life that a macabre accident thrust on us poor humans.'

'The shadows, they grow near . . .'

'This is not Herlich who seeks refuge in a fool's dream of life everlasting, who runs away from the battlefield because he fears death.'

'I cannot face it,' cried Herlich. 'I must pray for life everlasting.' He breathed slowly from shallow lungs.

'I signed the warrants! I gave the instructions!' said Beradin. 'I killed them!'

'But I gave the order. And the camps are still full of men about to die. The shadows . . .'

'It's a trick of the light.'

'It's no trickery,' said Herlich. 'There's a law more terrible than our laws, a law that can afford to wait, yet grows all the more terrible for the waiting.' His eyes became white-rimmed with fear. The superstitions of the past were creeping into Herlich's mind where the grey cell walls had disintegrated.

'We make the law,' said Beradin.

'We know nothing,' said Herlich.

'The revolution was your creation.'

'It was not my creation,' whispered Herlich. 'I was the instrument of a far greater power.'

'Stop!' cried Beradin. 'You'll not turn back now.' But Herlich wasn't listening.

'Perhaps it's not too late,' Herlich said to himself, 'I still might make my peace.' He looked at Beradin. 'The camps are full,' he said. 'Open the gates, set them free.' Beradin's eyes narrowed.

'Set me an example,' he whispered.

'Open the gates, my last order,' Herlich pleaded.

'And set free men thirsting for revenge!'

'Do as I say. It's my last hope.'

'No! No! No!' cried Beradin.

'Then I'll ring for Grundel!' Herlich's trembling hand stretched out towards the bell-push, tried to evade Beradin's hooked fingers.

'Let go, you fool,' called Herlich.

'Fool, am I?' said Beradin.

'Grundel!' Herlich called, 'Grundel!' Beradin pressed a hand over Herlich's mouth and reached for the pillow.

'Not Grundel,' he said. 'We'll not change now.' His voice was thick with fear and passion. He pressed harder on the pillow. Herlich's legs kicked and Beradin felt his hands grow strong, and press and press. All movement under the white bedclothes stilled. Beradin looked down his cheekbones and slowly withdrew the pillow. The face beneath was purple and the brittle

eyelashes crushed into staring, open eyes. Beradin looked at the pillow, then round the room. He stretched out a hand to raise Herlich's head but his fingers cringed away from the dead flesh. He looked at the corners of the room. 'No, there are no shadows. It is a trick of the light.' The pillow slipped from his fingers and fell at his feet. 'You shouldn't have called for Grundel, not Grundel.' He ran to the telephone, picked up the receiver, then replaced it as someone knocked on the door.

'Come in,' he said. A white-coated figure stood with one hand resting on the knob.

'It's time for the injection.'

'He's dead,' said Beradin, tightening the bands of self-control. 'No one must know, no one. There are affairs of state to be arranged.'

The white-coated scientist walked over to the bed and looked down, then drew up the sheet. He turned slowly towards Beradin. 'How did he die?'

'He's dead, that's all that counts. No one must know. I'll send guards to prevent anyone entering . . . and if you value your life . . .'

'He's been smothered!'

'He wanted to turn back . . . but it was too late. One more death counts little now.'

The scientist looked at Beradin. 'Where's it all leading?' he asked. 'Can you go on and on murdering? Will you never cry halt, overcome by horror?'

Beradin looked at the still form under the sheet. 'I followed him to the gates of hell, then,' and Beradin's voice trembled, 'as my skin cringed from the fires of damnation *he* begged forgiveness from God!' The white-coated scientist backed away. 'And you,' said Beradin, 'you promised to cure him.'

'The doctors gave him up for dead.'

'Now he is dead and you'll do as I say or you'll be a corpse yourself. Keep your mouth shut. Fix his face so that he looks peaceful when a million people file past his coffin.' Beradin led the doctor out of the room.

Schmidt looked at the full-size photograph of Herlich, then at his half-smoked cigarette and stubbed it out with quick,

nervous movements. He left the edge of his chair and walked to the door, stopped, listened and turned to the tall windows of his office. He looked at his reflection and smoothed his fair silky hair. For a moment he watched the traffic file both ways along the broad boulevard, watched the two continuous streams rather than any individual car. Then he turned to his desk and the open file. He flicked over the crop estimates from the three agricultural areas. Down, all three of them, down. There was no comfort there. He heard the door open and turned as Beradin entered and stood silently, closing the door at his back. 'Well?' asked Beradin, his small black eyes focusing on the file, then glancing back quickly. He moved to the windows and with the light streaming over his shoulder faced Schmidt. He lifted a smooth white hand. Schmidt stared at the small plump fingers and the small nails.

Beradin spoke sharply: 'Have you decided?'

'Give me time.'

Beradin's eyes glistened. Then he said: 'A day, a week, that's the most you can expect.'

'There are other opinions.'

'I shouldn't rely on help from the others. They'd rather blame your faulty tractors than their own inefficiency.'

'That's not true!'

'True? Where does truth come into it?' snapped Beradin.

He walked up to Schmidt and prodded his chest with a plump forefinger. 'The workers are going hungry. We must take their minds off their bellies' . . . he paused awhile, then added: 'This might be the occasion for another sacrifice. The public prosecutor would make mince-meat of you,' he said. Schmidt sat down. There could be no real change. It would always be dog eat dog.

'I misunderstood,' he said. 'I'll listen attentively.'

Beradin veiled his eyes and smiled with his mouth and teeth. 'Go to Heisenach and prove sabotage,' he said.

'Is this his advice too?'

'Herlich's?' asked Beradin. 'It's what he would have said.'

'Perhaps, I'd better see him first. . . .'

'No,' said Beradin sharply.

'Sabotage at Heisenach wouldn't exactly weaken your hand,' said Schmidt.

'It will help us both,' said Beradin.

Schmidt stared at his desk. 'Heisenach,' he said. 'Is it possible that there has been sabotage?'

'Implicate Willi Rummel and his father. Use Morris as bait for your trap.'

Schmidt flicked the file with his forefinger then looked slowly at Beradin. 'I thought . . .' he said. 'We thought, some of us, that after the death of Herlich a new era might begin.'

Beradin laughed harshly. 'There'll be no new era. I'll see to that. Neither fear nor weakness will make me change the course.' Then he looked out of the window. 'We are faced by a task bigger than any one of us.' He turned to Schmidt. His eyes were black and round and fixed unblinkingly on Schmidt. 'Remember that Herlich chose you for one reason only.' He paused. 'Because you are weak.'

'I'd better be going,' said Schmidt. If it was to be dog eat dog then he must try to be strong. The other had been a pipe-dream. If only . . .

Schmidt moved quickly and only glanced at the watch on his wrist when the small personal suitcase was locked. He put on a light fawn raincoat and hat. As he adjusted the collar and the brim before the mirror he heard the door bell ring. He hesitated, looked at his watch again, then strode to the door. She stood pale under the make-up, limp-armed, looking up into his face. She wore a loose beltless tent of a coat. Her hair, though carefully combed, was lifeless and her eyebrows had grown thin.

'I'm tired,' she said. She walked awkwardly past him, her limbs stiff with the weight in her womb, then lowered herself on to a high chair by the table.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'I can't get a bed in the hospital,' she said. He looked at his watch.

'Have you seen the matron?'

'They say they're full.' She shifted the weight off her right buttock and sat on the edge of the chair.

'They'd let you in if they thought it necessary.'

'You promised to speak to the authorities. You said they'd listen to Comrade Schmidt. You said they'd find room for his wife.'

'They said they'd admit you if they thought it necessary.'

'Who did you speak to?'

'The head of the department.'

'Which department?'

'I haven't time to answer now.'

She looked at the bare wall opposite. 'You've changed,' she said. 'I don't count any more. It's no use pretending.'

'For God's sake stop,' he cried. He ached, body and soul, for sympathy and all she had to offer was 'It's no use pretending.'

He said: 'I'm in trouble, big trouble. If I don't act quickly you'll be a widow.' His face was pale and his lips pressed tightly together. He snatched up his case. She shook her head quickly as if a leech was biting her cheek.

'Can't you see what you're doing, to us, to this child?' she asked. He stood by the door.

'What?' he asked.

'I thought you were human, that you loved me. But you don't. You're stitched into a strait-jacket and can't take it off. Go,' she said, 'go!'

'Shut up,' he snapped. His entrails knotted and the tubes in his chest constricted.

'You don't care what happens.'

He walked up to her. 'You're getting hysterical,' he said. She moved her head back and laughed, but her eyes never left his face.

'I haven't time to stay talking,' he said.

'You found time to make me pregnant.' He turned his back on her and walked into the bedroom and picked up his suitcase.

From the door, he said: 'You're a strong, healthy girl.'

'I was before I married you,' she said, and laughed.

'Control yourself.'

'Why did you say you loved me? Why didn't you tell the truth? Then there would have been no child here!' She held her cupped hands under the bulge and shook her head from side to side. 'Can't you see what's happened to us? We are strangers,' she cried. 'You hadn't even time to fix a bed for me in the hospital' He looked at his hat. This could go on for ever without getting any further.

'I must go now,' he said. He bent to kiss her, but her lips were cold. At the door he said: 'What the hell can I do? I've no choice,'

and slammed it from the outside. He walked down the corridor. Hospital beds didn't grow on trees. What few there were had to be rationed.

He opened his car door, threw his case on the back seat and climbed in. He forced himself to think about ploughs and tractors. He forced Leila out of his mind. He forced himself to think of tractors, tractors, tractors. Herlich was dying. The tractor was on the stations and farm managers were complaining—blaming the tractor for their failure to reach the yearly target. And the Politburo, without the old man, was listening to their complaints. But there was a way out if he could prove the farmers were up to their eyes in sabotage, if he could lure Willi Rummel into a trap baited by the renegade Englishman.

He drove out of the city towards the Western frontier, past the uranium mine, and stopped outside the town hall of the village called Heisenach, the village of his childhood and youth. He walked through the main doors to the Mayor's office on the ground floor and entered without knocking. Herr Rummel looked up, his face lined and grey, his eyes dull behind clouded spectacles.

'Good morning, Comrade,' said Schmidt, 'seen your son lately?'

Rummel ignored the question and countered with: 'Staying at the inn again?'

'The beds are good,' said Schmidt.

'It's not the barmaid, then?'

Rummel laid his pen on the desk and pushed the open file away. He leant back in his chair and took off his steel-rimmed spectacles.

'So you've come to crack the whip again, more threats, more alarms. When I was young we told a story about a boy who cried Wolf once too often.'

'I'm not interested in your childhood memories,' said Schmidt. 'I'm here to examine complaints about equipment.'

'You'll soon change your attitude.'

'Even though you are the Mayor in Heisenach, at my headquarters you are only a name, and one name is as suspect as the next.'

Rummel breathed slowly and deliberately. He laid his hands flat on the desk and said: 'We succeed or fail on the farms, not at your headquarters.'

Schmidt turned his back on the seated Mayor. 'I want to see the tractor station,' he said.

Rummel picked up the telephone, asked for a number, then said: 'Hermann? Rummel here. I've Schmidt with me. Yes, Comrade Schmidt. Are you busy?' Rummel turned to Schmidt and said: 'He says he's busy.'

'We'll go all the same.'

'Hermann? He's coming to see you.' Rummel smiled.

'Yes, I'll come as well. . . .' He stood up slowly and picked up his hat from behind the door.

Schmidt thought hard for a moment, then as they walked through the echoing hall he said: 'You think you're pretty safe down here, don't you?' Rummel paused in his stride, stopped and waited for Schmidt, then turned round and said:

'I've confidence in Hermann. He's strong because his ideas come from the men who are doing the work. When it comes to the final count, they always win. You can shoot some of them for sabotage once, twice, but if production fails, what next? You can't shoot them all.' He walked through the main doors into the street. Schmidt followed. They climbed into the car and drove along the dusty main street. Schmidt sat nervous with his thoughts. Concentrate on the enemy's weakness, on Rummel's politically unreliable son.

A half a mile out of the village, over a side turning, stretched a white arc of wood with the inscription painted in red: 'No. 1 Collective Farm and Tractor Station, Heisenach.' As they drove down the black glistening tarmac lane with the kerbstone freshly white, Schmidt said: 'I see you've smartened up. It looks good.'

'You can't eat white kerbstones,' said Rummel.

A labourer in the distance heard the car and started cutting a hedge. They drove past him. He waited for them to turn into the large farmyard, then sat down again. Rummel stepped out, and walked to a flight of wooden stairs built against the outside of the wall and started to climb slowly.

Half-way up he leant on the rail and pretended to look across the open field towards the slag heaps of the uranium mine.

'I believe there's an Englishman called Morris controlling the refining process over there,' said Schmidt casually.

'Is there?' said Rummel. The blood pounded in his



throat and his collar felt tight. He eased his tie a little then continued the climb. He opened the door at the top, walked through the outer office, nodded to a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, and went straight through into the office, and sat down on the first chair. He looked into Hermann's face.

'What's wrong?' asked Hermann, rising to his feet and walking round the desk. The girl stood in the doorway with a glass of water. Schmidt stood behind.

Rummel took the glass. 'Old age,' he said. 'Stairs play the devil with my legs.'

'Aye,' said Hermann, turning his blunt features and looking at Schmidt. 'What the hell do you want?' he asked.

'Have you seen my letter?' asked Schmidt.

Hermann nodded to a pile of letters overflowing a tray on his desk. 'You write too many damn' letters, telling agriculture what to do with your damned machines.' As he spoke Hermann thrust forward his heavy chin.

'I want to see round the tractor station and talk to some of the workers. I want to ask them what's wrong.'

'Ask *them*?' roared Hermann. 'I'll answer any questions. I'll not have you destroying my authority.'

'I wouldn't put too much importance on your authority,' Schmidt said.

'Are you here to help production or ruin it?' asked Hermann.

'I'd like to see the tractor station,' said Schmidt, a white smile taut on his lips. Hermann clenched his huge fists by his side and drew his arms back slightly. He glared at Schmidt. Schmidt glanced sharply at Rummel who slid the empty glass on to the table.

'We might as well get it over,' Rummel said, and stood up.

'You'd better wait here,' said Hermann.

'I'll come with you.'

Hermann opened the door. 'I'll be back in an hour,' he said to his young secretary. 'If there are any 'phone calls tell them I'm out gallivanting with Comrade Schmidt.' He waited for Rummel at the head of the stairs and helped him down.

'I want to see everything,' said Schmidt.

Hermann jerked his head back and laughed harshly. 'How long are you staying?' Schmidt ignored the question and reached

into his car for his briefcase. Hermann said: 'I suppose you can put everything right in an hour.'

'I want to see the ploughs first,' said Schmidt.

Hermann led the way to a large barn, opened the door and walked into the smell of hot oil and metal.

'There they are,' he said.

'Ten new ploughs,' said Schmidt, 'and ten new tractors.' Hermann lumbered to the nearest and primed the engine with petrol, set the throttle and gripped the starting handle with his thumb acting as a fifth finger. A mighty heave started in his right leg, travelled with his straightening back and strong arm and jerked the pistons into life. The engine ran smoothly. Then he walked to a shining ploughshare and patted it with the open palm of his huge hand.

'They're lovely tractors, lovely ploughs, but they're no damn good. We want to plough deep, to turn up the soil that's never been touched before. These things only skim the surface.'

Schmidt frowned: 'Can't you improvise?' he asked.

'We did once, but our handyman now works at the uranium mines, at twice the wage we paid him. The ploughshares he botched up broke soon after he left.'

'What's wrong with the tractors?'

'They're not big enough to pull deep ploughs. We had to use two tractors to pull one deep plough, wasting time, labour, fuel, and putting up our costs.'

'Why must you suddenly plough deep?' asked Schmidt.

'Why?' asked Hermann. 'Because they're doing it on the other side of the frontier. We can see them ploughing. We can compare their crops with ours, side by side.'

Schmidt looked at Hermann's big feet planted firmly apart on the oil-stained concrete.

Rummel rested his sweat-dampened hand on Hermann's shoulder. 'What do you want to see next?' he asked Schmidt.

'Could I see a potato field?'

The fresh air outside, after the fumes of burnt oil, tasted like clean cool water. Rummel breathed slowly and deeply. They drove away from the farm building along a narrow, rutted lane dusted with fine soil baked yellow by the sun.

'This soil doesn't look heavy,' said Schmidt.

'Not when it's dry,' said Hermann. 'The rain turns it into glue. Sometimes the tractors sink axle deep.' Hermann glanced at Rummel's pale, sweating face and said to Schmidt: 'Take it easy, you'll ruin your car springs.' Schmidt slowed down. They climbed out and looked at a ten-acre field of potatoes. Here and there bare earth stared through the brown stalks of leaves rotting in the sun. 'What's the excuse?' asked Schmidt.

'No transport. We had to plant seed potatoes from our last year's crop.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'We need seed potatoes grown in a different soil.'

'I don't see what difference that would make.'

'You're looking at the difference now,' said Hermann. 'It's called blight.'

'Why is that?' asked Schmidt.

'I don't know why,' said Hermann. 'I only know it always happened. My father knew it and his father too.'

As they jolted back Schnudt said: 'Industry provided you with tractors. Considering the claims that re-armament makes, you're lucky to get any.'

'We might as well have none for all the use they are,' said Hermann.

Outside the office, Rummel stepped from the car and said: 'Hermann can drive me back.' Schmidt looked from one to the other.

'Are you going to make an issue of the tractors?' he asked.

'We bloody well are,' snorted Hermann. Schmidt wanted to say, 'Perhaps I've made a mistake, an honest mistake,' but he dared not. An admission would be used against him. So he raced the engine, slammed home the gear, and drove off in a cloud of yellow dust.

'Can he do anything?' asked Hermann.

'He could have done a year ago,' said Rummel, 'but now he's like a puppet strangling in its own strings.'

'I'm not so sure,' said Hermann.

Kurt Schmidt thought hard as he drove up the long hill to the inn. Even though the targets had not been reached, Hermann and Rummel were in strong positions. What they said about the ploughs and tractors and the seed potatoes made sense.

His car tyres left tread marks over the soft tar on the crown of

the road as he pulled up in front of the old inn. He walked across the worn cobbles into the cool dark bar, then rang a brass bell on the counter. He wondered who would answer, the old man or the girl. Neat footsteps echoed in the corridor.

'Kurt!' she said, and stepped forward.

'Happy birthday.' He pushed a small box over the counter. 'Open it.' She took the box, then held out at arm's length two sapphire and silver ear-rings. 'Let me put them on,' he said. She looked at him, her eyes large. She leant over the bar. She felt the smooth tips of his fingers gently brush the hair away from the lobes of her ears.

'Tell me if I hurt,' he said. He turned the screws, the outside of his hands brushing the down at the nape of her neck. He folded the collar of her dress and undid a button so that the sweep of her neck and the hollows above her collar bones were bare.

'Now look at yourself.' She slowly raised her hand to the unfastened button.

'You look beautiful,' he said. 'You don't know what it means, just to see you, young and beautiful, the only thing in life that's worth while.'

'Kurt,' she said, 'I'd like to talk to you.'

'Everything else is existing not living.'

'But you're important,' she said. 'You can do things, lock people up—or have them set free.' She leant towards him.

'You're like the breath of spring,' he said. She turned round quickly, her eyebrows raised, her lips apart.

'You're not going?' she asked.

'I have to—but I'll be back later. I may stay the night.' She fingered the loosened button on her frock.

'I'd like that,' she said.

'Perhaps we can talk then . . . about your father,' he said.

Gerda Graf watched the door swing slowly back, then glanced out of the windows at the car gliding down towards the frontier post.

Seidler stood outside the post as Schmidt's car stopped. He ran his fingers through his sandy hair, smoothed the continuous line of his ginger eyebrows and rubbed the bristles on his chin. He jerked his shoulders and pulled his jacket down at the back.

Schmidt drove alongside and stuck his head through the open window.

Seidler ~~fell~~ down, glanced over his shoulder, then whispered: 'You from Beradin?'

Kurt frowned and said: 'I'm Comrade Schmidt.'

Seidler hissed: 'The one-eyed bastard's crossed the line again.'

Kurt nodded. 'When?' he asked.

'He left home before daybreak.'

'Did you see him cross the line?' asked Schmidt.

'It took a lot of doing,' said Seidler, staring with wide-open glassy eyes at Kurt. 'I followed him right up to the river and he never knew I was behind him.'

'Did he take his boots off?'

'His boots?' Seidler frowned.

'To cross the river,' said Kurt.

'No,' he said, his eyes still fixed on Kurt. 'He never does, he always goes across with them on. Always.'

He's lying, thought Kurt, but hadn't the guts to say so. Seidler was still looking at him, waiting for instructions.

'What else do you know?' he asked.

'He'll be back to-night. They're expecting him at the inn,' said Seidler. Schmidt stepped out of the car and walked past Seidler into the guard commander's office. The young non-commissioned officer jumped to his feet.

'I want every available man deployed along the frontier before sundown,' said Schmidt, then turning to Seidler: 'You'd better go back to the farm now. You'll be giving evidence to-morrow at the Town Hall.'

Seidler nodded and backed to the door. 'When you catch him, remember who told you . . .'

'Get out!' said Kurt.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW much do we owe you?' asked Willi Rummel. The landlord scribbled a bill and shuffled on flat feet to their table.

'Keep the change,' said Willi.

'Thank you, sir,' said the landlord, and folded the notes quickly and withdrew Willi's chair as he stood up.

Willi led the way into the twilight. On the pavement Granger asked: 'Suppose we're separated?'

'Make for the inn at Heisenach.'

'Is that where your girl friend lives?'

Willi nodded. 'Let's keep quiet now,' he said, and slapped Granger on the shoulder and added: 'I've the grandfather of all hangovers.'

They cut behind the main street and headed across the open fields towards the evening star low down in the dark eastern sky. A thin mist rising from the earth lay like a swathe over the ripe crops and drenched the grass with dew.

They plodded silently through the darkness waiting for the moon to rise. For six miles they climbed, slowly and monotonously, then Willi half raised his right hand, and motioned Granger to stop. They crawled forward on hands and knees as if they were approaching the edge of a flat world.

Willi stretched on his stomach in the long grass on top of the escarpment and watched the two frontier guards on the far bank of the river, dark shadows gliding ankle deep through the ground mist. He pointed them out with a long finger to Granger lying alongside.

Beyond the river on the top of the far hill, looking nearer than five miles, stood the inn, dark against the moonlit sky, with bright pin-points of light shining from the small low windows.

Willi watched the patrol moving steadily on to the distant horse-shoe bend, gripped his precious rucksack and crawled over to the right where he could see the graceful narrow span of the old stone bridge, the starting point of the patrol. To-night, more than ever, he must be careful, not because of Granger, but because he must deliver the frock. He wiped a tear from his one good eye and tried again to pierce the shadows. He felt suddenly uneasy, as if a sixth sense was passing a message that he couldn't quite understand. It was more than the guards acting strangely. It was the old fear that he ought not to return, that Gerda ought to be with him, that together they should be heading away from disaster instead of plunging more deeply into it.

He turned to Granger. 'Why don't you go back to your wife and family?' he whispered hoarsely.

'I've a job to do, and so have you,' said Granger.

Willi crawled back and watched the patrol. The two guards still looked neither to right nor left. They're almost afraid of seeing someone, thought Willi. Not once had they stopped. Not once had they turned round. Willi jerked his shoulders nervously and waited. The sweat formed a cold film between his rough shirt and the flat of his back. He shivered and cursed all the Schnapps he had drunk. He beckoned Granger to follow and, with the rucksack held carefully against his hip, started to crawl slowly forward in the shadows under the hedge. The heavy dew soaked through their trousers and felt cold to their knees. Wet grass seeds stuck to the rough fabric of their coats. Fifty yards from the river by the lonely oak tree they halted. The dark river-water slopped and bubbled in the shadows, but no other sound disturbed the silence.

They tuned their lungs with the cool night air, stood up and with long easy strides loped towards the bank, slithered thigh deep into the shallows and, with the rucksacks held against their chests, started to edge their way against the current. When they were half-way across a pair of pheasants took off from the field beyond the far bank and flew low towards their heads, then banked and wheeled on one wing at the last moment. They pressed on, shoes slipping off the uneven rocks littering the river bed, ears trying to hark beyond the music of the water. They waded slowly on to the shelf of sand and, heads down, scuttled a hundred yards upstream leaving behind trails of wet footprints. Willi shivered again.

All the heat of the day had escaped into the clear sky and left the ground cold. Willi raised his head above the level of the bank, parted the weeds and looked at the hillside field. He could see over to his right two thin trails of flattening stalks dribbling like rain down a window pane towards the point where they had crossed the river. They crawled across the footpath into the shadow of the hedge, waited a moment, then ignoring the thorns that pricked their hands started the long crawl up the hill.

Granger held his breath. The wooden fence creaked ahead. Willi rolled under the hedge, his white face hidden in the shadows. Granger followed him a moment later. They heard feet crushing stones into the soil and brushing against the stubble. They waited tensed for the kick in the back, the prod of the rifle

butt. Willi gripped the rucksack and the beautiful summer's dress it contained, closed his eye and waited. Granger tried to keep thoughts of his family out of his mind. One set of footsteps brushed past, then another. 'Go downstream,' whispered voice, 'I'll go up.' 'You sure you saw something?' asked a second voice, then silence.

Willi counted a hundred, extricated himself from the hedge-row, rose to his feet, waited for Granger, then ran with shortened strides uphill. Their feet slithered backwards inside their shoes at each step and wet trousers chafed the inside of their thighs. Willi ran quietly in the lead, his head jerking from side to side, raking the moonlit hillside with his one good eye. The wind whistled over his teeth in rhythm with his steps but without melody. A figure rose up out of the corn on his blind side.

'Got you!' a hoarse voice shouted. Willi felt his eye blink and his arms jerk back at the elbow.

The moon shone over his shoulder on to the guard's face. He butted the top of his head forward and felt the jar as it hit bone. The guard fell back, both hands clutching his face.

Willi ran on, his mouth dry, his legs weak with fright. The rucksack flopped up and down on his hip, held awkwardly under his arm. He kept plodding on, more and more slowly until he was walking, head down, feet stumbling at each tuft. He looked over his shoulder down the long slope. He could see Granger fifty yards behind. Perhaps the guards had given up the chase, or perhaps they were still there, silent, unseen. He waited for Granger.

'You're slow,' he said.

'I finished the guard off—he won't give the alarm.'

'Good,' said Willi.

'No one else heard him,' said Granger.

'Then they don't know we've crossed. They're still waiting for us.'

'They were expecting someone,' said Granger.

'Let's move,' said Willi.

* He held on to the rucksack and started a wide detour away from the inn, leading them towards Mainfurt. At the rabbit woods he doubled back on his tracks. The sweat cooled on his forehead and his damp clothes began to feel cold. He tasted salt

on his lips and took off his beret so that the breeze ruffled through his blond hair. He lifted the black patch from his eye and started to hum a tune. He headed straight for the lights shining from the hill-top. He thought of Gerda and the frock in his rucksack. Granger thought the kids should be fast asleep by now.

They crept into the cobbled yard, washed their hands in the horse trough, peeped through the bar window, and saw it was empty apart from Gerda's uncle.

'Wait in the stable till I come out,' said Willi.

'You're not stopping to make love to her?' snapped Granger.

'Five minutes, that's all,' said Willi and walked into the inn.

'Hello, Uncle. Gerda home?' The old man looked up quickly and slid his cognac under the counter.

He stood up and smiled awkwardly. 'She's in the kitchen,' he said.

'I'll take a baby champagne and a pot of beer—and have one for yourself.'

'No,' said Herr Graf, 'I'm cutting down.' The old man's hands fluttered around and served Willi.

'Cheers,' Willi said, and walked down the corridor.

He kicked on the kitchen door and shouted: 'Let me in!' The door opened and Gerda stood in the doorway.

'Willi!' she said, 'did you see them? Do they know what prison father's in?'

'He's still in Mainfurt, that's all they could tell me.'

'Can they help?'

'Darling. Don't torture yourself.' Willi looked at her. Her voice was music. Her eyes touched with dew drops.

'I'm sorry,' she said. He took off the rucksack and smiled, then laughed a shade too loudly.

'Many happy returns,' he said. She lowered her eyes. Her fingers touched the car-rings but Willi did not notice.

'Thank you,' she said.

'I've brought you a present,' he said, and lowered his half-empty pot on to the oak table. She watched his strong fingers unbuckle the straps, saw layers of tissue paper unfold. Once there would have been joy. Her excitement would have bubbled like champagne. Once she would have held her breath at the sight of delicate embroidery and lace. Now she felt unmoved.

Nevertheless she whispered, not wanting to hurt him: 'Oh

Willi, it's beautiful.' He pushed the rucksack towards her. She stood without moving, finding it hard to pretend when all she wanted was news of her father. Yet the dress was lovely.

'Go and try it on.'

'Oh I will—it's lovely.' She shook her head. It couldn't harm her poor father, trying on the dress. She stroked the frill of lace with her finger-tips. 'Has Thorp heard anything?' she asked. He avoided her eyes.

'He didn't even know your father had been arrested.'

She turned away from both Willi and the dress.

'I thought this might cheer you up,' he said. She fingered the dress, fingered the lace hem.

'Try it on, before anybody comes in,' he urged. She jerked her head up.

'Who are you expecting?'

'Your uncle,' he said quickly. She picked up the bag, walked into the corridor, up the stairs to her room. She switched on the light, lifted out the dress, shook it gently and held it against her body in front of the wardrobe mirror. She stood dreaming for a moment then undid the buttons of her home-made linen frock.

Willi sat down to wait. He snuled at his disappointment. It was no use pretending. The birthday present had fallen flat. But it had been worth the risk. Even the faint light in her eyes had made it worth while. Her smiles were too rare since they'd taken her father away.

He heard her light footsteps returning along the corridor. She stood in the doorway, her eyes such pictures of sad, confused beauty that the breath halted in his throat. As he looked closer, he saw faint shadows under her eyes and a tautness of the muscles at the corners of her jaw. He thought, once our eyes met and the world dissolved. Nothing existed except the light and beauty in this room. Once our limbs turned to liquid, our arms drew around each other without urging. We stood here in a magic room which is magic no longer. And now I watch the cold hand of her father drag her away.

She turned round and looked over her shoulder, then took two steps towards him.

'It's beautiful. . . .' She looked at the mirror on the wall, stroked the smoothly fitting bodice at her waist.

'Gerda,' he said, but the words stuck in his throat. She looked at her hands, then reached up on her toes and brushed a kiss on to his cheek and buried her face in his shoulder.

'If only father were here,' she said. Willi frowned. Anger stabbed through his mood of understanding. He pressed a hand against his temple.

'Thank you for a lovely present,' said Gerda, her eyes large and round.

'You've your own life to lead,' he said, the words coming fast to ease the frustration. 'You don't laugh any more.'

She heard a car in the distance.

'You must go now,' she said, 'before Schmidt returns.'

'What the hell are you doing with him!'

'Kurt Schmidt can help father.'

'Blast father,' said Willi. 'Yet it's that quality of loyalty, so much a part of you, that I love.'

They heard the car stop outside.

'That will be him,' said Gerda. Willi grabbed his rucksack and slid out of the back door.

'See you later,' he called, then disappeared.

Willi scuttled across the cobbles to the stables and climbed into the loft. He felt his way through the pitch-blackness across the creaking planks to the cabin, opened the door and crawled inside.

'It's Willi,' he said.

'Thank God,' said Granger and turned the lamp up.

'Do the clothes fit?' asked Willi.

'Everything. I'm a brewer's traveller—it's a good cover story.'

'The documents are genuine,' said Willi, 'they belonged to a gentleman I ferried across the line five days ago. Even if the police check with your home town, they'll find you exist!'

'You've done me proud.'

'Now listen carefully. They're expecting you at the inn. You've come by bus—your car broke down in Mainfurt—there's a card in your wallet showing the garage where you left it.'

'I've seen that.'

'The car's still at that garage. You stay the week-end at the inn—take the order for beer and spirits and test everything for dilution—the instruments are in the attaché case.'

'I've examined them.'

'Good. If all goes well, Morris should arrive before ten o'clock. You can either contact him in the bar or in his room. That's up to you. From now on you're on your own. On no account will you mention me to Morris. We think he may have sold Gerda's father to the police—to save his own skin.'

'Sounds healthy!' said Granger.

'To-day is Friday. On Sunday night I shall take you back across the frontier into the Western Zone—if all goes well!'

'Thanks, Willi, for a good job well done,' said Granger.

'Give yourself five minutes, then go into the inn. Your room has been booked. Good luck!' They shook hands. Granger dimmed the lamp for Willi to leave, then sat back to wait. He wiped his mind clean of past loyalties and loves. All his faculties were concentrated on the next forty-eight hours. It was too late now to philosophize, hope, complain. Now was the time for efficient action.

He crawled across the loft, down the vertical ladder and tip-toed to the stable doors. A cool draught eddied past his cheeks. Lights shone through the coloured curtains at the windows. He walked boldly across the yard and into the bar, blinked at the bright lamps and with well-assumed heartiness said:

'Lovely night outside. Lovely walk from the village.'

Uncle Graf nodded at the stranger.

'I've a room booked for two nights. Rayder's the name. R-a-y-d-e-r.' As he spoke, Granger looked round the otherwise empty bar, glad that he had only one half-tipsy landlord to bluff.

'You're from the brewery,' said Uncle Graf.

'Correct,' laughed Granger. 'I see you've all your wits about you.'

'I don't recognize you,' said Graf.

'Not my area, this. The other fellow's ill.'

'Sangstrom?'

Granger paused. 'No,' he said, 'not Sangstrom. Muller. Muller's ill.'

'Ah, yes,' said Uncle Graf. 'Muller. Can't be too careful these days. Your room's booked, two nights only.'

'Might stay longer if you give me a good order and your beer's not watered,' laughed Granger.

'My beer's the best in the valley.'

'Anyone else staying the week-end?' asked Granger.

'Almost full—our food's so good.'

'Any women?' asked Granger.

'No, all men. Chap called Morris from the mines—but you'll meet them at breakfast. I'll show you to your room. My niece is busy in the back with Comrade Schmidt.'

'Comrade Schmidt?'

'Don't tell me you've never heard of *him*?'

'Such a common name, old chap.'

'He's *the* Comrade Schmidt.'

'Oh he is, is he?'

'The tractor king.'

'The tractor comrade,' Granger corrected.

CHAPTER FOUR

KURT Schmidt closed the car door. He looked at the white-washed walls of the old inn, at the pantiled roof shining in the moonlight against the dark background of poplars. He stepped through long vague shadows lying across the country lane. He bent down and emptied from the wet turn-ups of his trousers cars of corn. He vaulted a fence and walked between white-topped beer tables across a lawn on to the worn cobbles of the back yard. He breathed through his mouth, short, sharp drags. His tongue was dry. He pushed through the back door into the corridor. The clatter of pots and mumble of conversation drifted between narrow walls from the bar.

The kitchen door was open. He saw Gerda, her cheeks pale and softly shadowed. She jumped when she saw him but recovered quickly.

'A cup of coffee?' she asked. He nodded and watched the movements of her arms as she poured milk from the jug and reached in the cupboard for sugar.

She smiled when she served him, her eyes looking away from his eyes as her arm brushed his shoulder.

'Are you alone?' he asked.

'Uncle's in the bar. More sugar?' she asked, swaying her hips and holding her back straight. She saw his eyes flicker to her breasts.

'Will you need a room-to-night?' she asked.

He drank his coffee in one quick swallow, avoided her eye, said: 'Yes,' then smiled unexpectedly. She didn't like his smile, nor his long outcurling lashes, but she smiled back, slowly and carefully. He thought of a flower opening in the summer sun.

'What can I do?' she asked. He turned to the cup of coffee. It was going to be easy.

'I need you,' he said. She looked at his shoulders, not quite broad enough for strength.

'Have another coffee?' she asked, and looked down at his cup as he turned round. 'You said we could talk about father.' Kurt frowned, then smiled good-humouredly to cover his calculations.

'He was very friendly with Willi Rummel, wasn't he?' Gerda nodded, keeping her eyes away from Kurt's.

'It's my belief that Willi led your father astray, that he, not your father, was guilty.' She lowered the coffee-pot to the table.

'To-day he helped some foreign spies across the frontier. We almost caught him on the way back,' Kurt said.

'Spies!' said Gerda, 'no, not Willi!'

'I want you to tell me all about him.'

Gerda's thoughts raced behind the frown of concentration.

'Is that the only reason you came to see me—to ask questions about Willi?'

'If we could prove that the police had arrested the wrong man—they would set your father free.'

She carried the empty coffee-pot to the draining board.

'Why don't you go away!' said Gerda, leaning over the slopstone.

'Do you want me to leave?' he asked.

'I don't want Willi mixed up with the police. He's done nothing wrong. All I want is my father.'

She looked through the window to the red glow in the sky from the night shift at the mines.

'Why the sudden hatred?' he asked.

'I thought you came here because you liked me,' she said, all soft and feminine again.

'Will my leaving solve your problems?' he asked. She thought he'd leave if she asked him again.

'No,' she said, and swayed towards him.

He caught hold of her arm and pulled her round. He waited for the tentative effort to repulse, made as if to give way, said: 'Gerda,' as if it were a matter of life or death, then kissed her tenderly at first. When she responded with her lips he let her go, abruptly.

'I'm . . . I'm sorry,' he said, and looked down into her eyes.

'Oh!' she gasped and flung her arms about his neck. She listened to the clock tick for about a minute then freed him.

'Have you eaten to-day?' she asked.

'Breakfast,' he said, vaguely. 'I've been on the frontier since noon.'

'You must be hungry.'

'You're very beautiful,' said Kurt, 'if that helps.'

They both heard a sudden clatter of iron-tipped boots on the cobblestones outside the window followed by the click-click-click of a free-wheeling bicycle and the clang of it being dropped against a hollow iron drain-pipe. The outside door swung open and a moth spiralled towards the light. Kurt saw a tall, thin, fair-haired man standing in the doorway, smiling at Gerda.

'Willi, you're back,' said Gerda. Willi stalked into the room, the black patch over his blind eye facing Kurt.

'Yes, I'm back,' he said, warned by Gerda's stiffness, and the way her eyes looked elsewhere.

'I'm preparing a meal for Comrade Schmidt,' she said.

Willi jerked his head round like a bird suddenly disturbed, his single eye throwing glances up and down Kurt.

'Hello, comrade,' he said. 'I hear you've been along the frontier all day. Any luck?'

'Please help uncle in the bar,' said Gerda. 'He can't cope with the rush by himself.'

'Is this a social call?' asked Willi.

'Willi!' snapped Gerda.

'All right,' said Willi. 'I'm going.' He smoothed the coarse fair hair under the elastic securing his patch. He made as if to

kiss Gerda but she pushed him away. A cuckoo sprang out of a wall clock and called out nine times. Willi took off his jacket, hung it in the passage-way and put on a white coat.

'Are you coming in the bar later on?'

'Not unless it's busy,' she replied.

'It's always busy when they finish work in the mines,' he said, kicking the steel tips of his boots as he walked tight-faced down the corridor into the noise and the cigarette smoke of the crowded bar.

'Why did you bundle him out?' asked Kurt.

'Three's a crowd,' said Gerda. She looked into Kurt's eyes, at his long feminine lashes, at the weak smile on his lips. She shrugged her shoulders.

'What are you going to eat?' she asked.

'Anything.'

'That's a great help,' she said. He's almost like uncle underneath, she thought, weak and helpless, yet he is a Minister. She tied an apron round her waist.

'You'll find bread in the bin and a knife in that drawer.'

She reached for a frying pan.

'My hands aren't too clean.'

'There's soap on the slopstone and a towel behind the door.' Kurt noticed the change in her voice. It reminded him of his wife.

'Here, here,' she called, 'rinse those hands before you wipe them on my clean towel. Let me roll your sleeves up.' As the tips of her fingers touched his wrist, particles of excitement shot along his arms. He stared at her fingers as they slowly tucked his sleeves in a roll above the elbow. He watched her walk back to the stove. She held the frying pan tightly and went through the motions of swilling fat round the pan mechanically.

Gradually Kurt breathed normally and the disturbing sensations quietened. He sat down on a hard wooden chair and cut three precise slices off a flour-covered home-baked loaf with a sharp, bone-handled knife.

Gerda hummed a little tune to herself, turned the flame out and pirouetted across the floor to the old Dutch dresser. She picked two plates from the paper-trimmed shelves. Her feet seemed to float over the clean red tiles and the hem of her linen dress billowed behind the smooth curve of her calves. She slid a plate

covered with crisp brown bacon and lightly scrambled egg on to the table and sat down to watch him eat.

'I thought you were hungry,' she said.

'I was,' said Kurt, picking up his knife and fork, but making no effort to eat.

'Whatever you're worrying about will wait.' She leant across the table, her finger smoothing the wood at the half-way line.

'I'm worried about you,' he said. She laughed, with more humour than she'd intended.

'Your food's going cold,' she said. He put his hand on top of hers.

'You know,' he said, but the words seemed to lose themselves as he looked into her eyes. 'You're too young to know what you're doing' and stabbed his fork into the bacon.

'I know,' she said. 'You feel old enough to be my father.'

'Not quite,' he said. He hadn't meant that.

'I think thirty's a nice age for a man,' she said quickly.

'I think nineteen is nice for a woman.' She laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

'A girl's quite a woman at nineteen.' He thought her distrust was lifting and laughed with her, then looked her in the eye and thought: 'Why shouldn't I take what she has to offer? Why shouldn't I help her father . . . or appear to?' Then he remembered the stakes he was playing for. He stood up, looked at his watch, walked to the door leading into the dining-room and said: 'There's a man I want to see in there.'

Granger washed and shaved, then waited until he heard the noise of heavy drinking drift up the stairs, before feeling his way down into the bar. He nodded to Willi and ordered a tankard of beer.

'You look busy to-night,' he said, and half-turned to watch the pianist thumping a marching song on the keys. He joined in the chorus, his voice hoarse and guttural. No one paid him any attention but Willi, who admired the technique.

Half-way through the second pint Granger intercepted a glance from Willi, followed the pointer and saw talking to Uncle Graf a tall, well-built man, with a handsome profile set off by thick wavy black hair touched with grey. As he turned full face to Granger his eyes twitched nervously.

Granger finished his beer, followed the man into the dining-room and sat at the other end of the long oak table.

'I overheard part of your conversation with the landlord,' said Granger. 'We appear to be the only residents.'

'Do we?' asked the stranger, abruptly.

'You speak good German,' said Granger.

'Do I?'

'With a slight accent. Is it English?' When there was no reply, Granger continued. 'That's quite unusual, you know. Most of the traffic flows the other way—Germans escaping to the West.'

'I believe so.'

'The numbers would be even greater but for one thing,' said Granger. Morris looked up. Granger said: 'If a man escapes by himself he leaves behind hostages.'

'Does he?'

'For instance, an acquaintance of mine left behind his wife. She was expecting a baby. The father, poor fellow, doesn't even know he has a fine son.' Granger watched Morris frown, saw his eyes close for a moment. 'Left his mother too,' continued Granger, 'but before he disappeared he gave her a present.' He slid the brooch along the table. As Morris slowly picked it up, Granger said: 'Pleasant little thing, isn't it?' Morris turned it over and over in his hand, then passed it back.

'Can a man who is so thoughtful in some ways erase the memory of his home from his mind?' asked Granger.

'Perhaps he would like to return,' said Morris, quietly.

'You think so?' asked Granger. 'Then why doesn't he?'

'Perhaps he's afraid . . . afraid of his new masters.'

'Of a trick?'

'Yes.'

'After seeing that brooch?'

Morris considered the point, then asked: 'What will the authorities do to him if he returns?'

'I can't give you any assurances,' said Granger, 'but there is a parable I seem to remember.'

'The prodigal son . . .'

Granger stood up.

'Well, Morris,' he said in English, 'what's the answer?'

'I don't know.'

'The answer can be made simple,' said Granger.

'Can it?'

'If the reason why you left England still holds good, then stay here. If you've found from experience . . .'

'Suppose there was no reason?'

'You mean that you left your wife and family and country without a reason?' Morris nodded his head.

'Men aren't completely rational. Sometimes we are little better than animals.' Morris raised his hands helplessly. 'Animals,' he repeated. 'Why is a kangaroo attracted by the angular posturing of an Aboriginal? Does it ever know why it ventured into the trap, even when the arrow pierces its chest? Does the wild duck know why it follows the mongrel dog into the net? Isn't it possible for a man to be fatally curious, to chase a rainbow, an ideal, then find out too late?'

'Is it too late?' Before Morris could reply, the kitchen door opened and Schmidt walked in. He looked first at Granger, then at Morris.

'You know each other?' he asked Morris.

'No,' said Morris.

'Who are you?' asked Schmidt, turning to Granger.

'This is one of my brewery's houses,' said Granger, balancing on his dignity.

'Why are you speaking to this man?'

'It is our business to find out if our customers are satisfied. Are you a customer?'

'I have special police powers in this area.' Granger looked suitably impressed.

He stuttered: 'If this man is a saboteur, he has nothing to do with the hotel, I assure you.'

'May I see your papers?'

'He's all right,' said Morris. 'He was only enquiring about my welfare. A little officiously, like a good German.'

'Your papers, all the same,' said Schmidt. Granger passed them over, then slid the brooch into his pocket. Schmidt glanced at the identity card, at business letter headings, ration coupons, tobacco coupons, then handed them back.

'You may leave now,' he said.

'But my dinner?'

'Get out!' snapped Schmidt, more with frustration than ill temper. Granger flicked his head forward in a salute, turned on his heel and left.

'Sit down, Morris,' said Schmidt and ~~drew up a chair~~. 'I have a proposition from Beradin for you. He ~~appreciates your prompt action in turning over the man Graf, but he is suspicious. He thinks you might have mistaken Graf for a police spy.~~

'Good Lord!' said Morris, too slowly to carry conviction.

'So Beradin offers you a bargain. If you can incriminate Willi Rummel and his father in this plot to smuggle you over the frontier, he will arrange for your wife to join you here.'

'I'm not much good at that sort of thing,' Morris said hesitantly.

'Beradin also gives punishments for failure.'

'I want to help . . . but how? I've no experience.'

'You'll find a way.'

'After what happened to the other man?'

'The problem is yours. I advise you to think hard, and of your wife.' Morris closed his eyes.

'My wife and son,' he said softly.

'Your son?' asked Schmidt. 'I didn't know you had a son.' Morris opened his eyes, opened them wide.

'I . . . ' he said, 'she . . . she was pregnant when I left.'

'How did you know the child was a son?'

'I wanted a son. . . .'

'How did you *know* it was a son? Who told you?'

'I didn't know!' said Morris.

'Who told you?'

'No one! I didn't know! It was a slip of the tongue!'

'Listen, my English friend, Beradin planted you near the frontier for a reason. There is nothing he doesn't know—no one you can trust. Think carefully about his offer.'

'For God's sake leave me alone then.' Schmidt paused. He caught a glimpse of a likeness between Morris's predicament and his own. There was a difference only in degree. Morris was further down the steps, on the tenth and last, that was all.

'Think it over,' he said, and walked out. Morris sat down slowly. His head drooped over the table and his hands grasped his temples.

Willi poured Uncle Graf a cognac and had a large beer himself. 'How long's Schmidt been in the back with Gerda?' he asked. 'Kurt? He's here again, is he?' asked Uncle Graf.

'You didn't know?'

'I've been serving here all night.'

'Drinking yourself stupid!'

'I was born stupid,' said Graf. 'Let's not insult our only friend.'

'What's Schmidt here for?' Uncle Graf smiled an old, a tolerant, a friendly smile.

'For one so stupid, the reason seems clear to me, but then, she's my niece. I've seen her grow up. When they're young their actions are more clearly linked to their motives.'

'Aren't you going to warn her?'

'Warn her? She needs no warning! Especially when love contributes something to her dedicated purpose.'

'What do you mean?'

'You go on thinking she's pure and innocent—that's love!'

'You're drunk!'

Willi looked at the customers; frontier guards with women from Mainfurt, drinking too much; farm managers extending hospitality to Hermann in their customary corner, pretending to despise but sliding crafty looks at the painted ladies. Higher grade farm hands and the mineworkers boozing their pay packets. He glanced at the far corner and, through the ebb and flow of the crowd, caught glimpses of Granger and Morris in serious conversation. Hermann walked up to the bar. 'Five beers and one for yourself.' Willi held six pots in his left hand, half filled each in turn, then a last slow pull to retain the froth.

'Here's your beer.' Hermann paid, nodded at Willi and carried his drinks away, his broad strong back straining the seams of his jacket.

Willi washed and dried a few glasses, then closed his eyes as the thought that he might lose Gerda seared through his mind. He lit a cigarette. Schmidt would have no scruples about a girl blossoming into womanhood. He wouldn't refrain from sowing seeds of inquisitiveness, from dazzling her with exotic phrases, from laughing at her scruples, from playing on the theme that beauty soon faded or from offering to release her father. Willi thought of his own patience and restraint. Gerda had lain on the hillside in his arms but his caresses had been gentle reflections of

his tender love. As soon as the bar filled he'd call Gerda. Better not leave her alone with Schmidt too long. He walked round the tables and collected a handful of dead glasses and was stacking them on the draining board when the outer door swung open. Willi watched the newcomer cross the threshold and look at the customers. He lowered a wet glass slowly into the hot water then wiped his hands on the white apron. He watched Wolff saunter to the far corner of the bar, and sit on a stool with his shoulder close to the wall.

'A cognac, a large cognac and one for yourself,' he said, his smooth voice carrying half the length of the counter. Willi glanced round the room. No one seemed to be paying any attention. He filled a glass with cognac and placed it quietly in front of the newcomer.

'Where's yours?' Wolff asked.

'You're drinking alone,' said Willi, taking the coin and ringing it in the till. Wolff kept his small, long-sighted eyes fixed on Willi's face.

'Have a drink,' he said, and showed his small white even teeth. 'We don't want people to think we're quarrelling. People listen to quarrels.' Willi looked round and saw Uncle Graf trying to conceal his interest. Hermann seemed to be staring at a fly on the ceiling. Willi reached along the bar for his half-empty glass, then faced Wolff.

'Finish your drink and get out,' he said, his good eye staring at the tramline on the bridge of Wolff's nose. Wolff sipped his cognac.

'Relax,' he said. 'You look worried. Worry is bad.'

'I'm through,' said Willi. 'Get that into your head. The sooner you leave Gerda and me alone . . .'

'Gerda doesn't want to be left alone,' said Wolff, 'and you can't quit either, you know that.' He smiled and his eyes grew even smaller. 'You're in it right up to your neck, right up to your neck.' Then he laughed softly as if he'd just told a good joke.

'I helped some unfortunate people, I did it for them not for you.'

'Not for the money?' asked Wolff. 'I hear you went shopping.'

'It was a present for Gerda.'

'Where is she?'

'In the back with Comrade Schmidt.'

'She's a clever girl.'

'Leave her out.'

'If you won't help me, I'll have to ask her.' Willi laughed uneasily.

'Look. Let's be reasonable. I helped your friends. They paid, me, but I'd have done it for nothing. Now the matter's closed.'

'But I've more friends who want to cross the line.'

'Haven't you caused enough trouble in this neighbourhood?'

'Trouble?'

'Listen,' said Willi. 'My father's Mayor of this village.'

'That gives us more protection.'

'You're on your own, Wollf.'

'But I'm not,' said Wollf. He paused a moment. 'I've two men in the car outside. They want to cross the line.' Willi shook his head angrily.

'That's impossible. All the guards are out,' he said.

'We can manage it together or I can send them in looking for Gerda. You wouldn't want them caught, looking for Gerda, would you?'

'No one can cross the line now. I only just got back alone.'

'Alone?' asked Wollf. Willi served two beers to a customer then returned to Wollf.

'You'll have to wait,' he said. Wollf smiled.

'That's better,' he said.

'Give me a week,' said Willi. 'Let's get the meeting over. Let's get that out of the way—then we can consider things.'

'I can't wait a week,' said Wollf. He emptied his glass. 'I'll wait for you by the barn, to-night at the usual time.' He walked away from the counter and out through the door. Willi stared at the swirling, smoke-laden air. He wondered if Wollf had seen Granger with Morris.

CHAPTER FIVE

KURT pushed away the empty plate. He looked at Gerda. Gerda was important. She might help in his search for proof of sabotage. He liked the curve of her lips. They were full and firm. He liked her eyes. They were clean and healthy. Her body was young and lithe. All she'd want would be to hear

words of love, of everlasting devotion. Once he could have spoken of the moon and stars and the light in her eyes and meant every word. Now they would be just words spoken not to disappoint her. Gerda was like a child playing its first game, trying to win without quite understanding either the rules or the moves; eager, wholehearted. Not a bit like his wife. She knew all the moves, all his moves anyway.

Gerda looked at his mouth waiting for the lips to move. The growing volume of noise from the bar told her the busy period had started. They would need her soon.

'I've forgotten to lock the chickens up!' she said. She untied her apron, smoothed down her dress and unhooked a coat from a peg in the lobby. 'Come on, or Willi'll want me in the bar.'

Kurt heard footsteps in the corridor. Willi stood in the doorway, his one good eye flashing from Gerda to Kurt.

'Gerda!' he said.

'I'm in a hurry,' she replied. 'Be a dear and manage with uncle for a while.'

'Where are you going?' he asked, his face white. He grasped her by the arm. 'You're not going out at this time of night, not even to save your father.' She wrenched free her arm. Willi stepped back from the heat of her action. 'I'm only thinking of you, Gerda.'

'I can look after myself.' Cries of 'Four beers! Service! Willi!' and the sound of pots banging on table tops echoed down the corridor. Willi turned to Kurt and stared at him with a bitter, angry eye. 'If you harm one hair of her head . . .'

'Why don't you get back to your own business?' said Gerda, stamping her foot on the floor. 'They'll break the bar up in a minute!' Willi felt a pain in his chest. He snapped control on his anger. Without further words he turned on his heel and walked down the corridor.

'Do you think I ought to come?' asked Kurt, the hate in Willi's eye still bright in his mind. Gerda opened the outside door.

'He can manage, he's a wonderful waiter.'

'Which way?' asked Kurt. She took hold of his arm. They walked close to each other away from the lights of the inn, away from the singing and shouting and laughter, away from the cobblestones down a narrow path to the chicken run.

The bare ground, scratched clean of grass, was deserted. Gerda opened the wooden gate in the wire-netting fence and walked to the cabin. The sliding door over the foot-high archway was already closed. She listened to the rustle of feathers and the brooding clucks of the birds, then returned to Kurt.

'My father used to do all this,' she said.

'Is that the only reason you want him back?'

'I loved him more than anyone—until I met you.'

'I might be able to help,' he said. She threw her arms around his neck.

'Could you?' she asked, her eyes looking at the distant range of hills, her body pressed hard against him.

Willi looked at the clock through the thick smoke of pipe and cigarette. They'd been away for over an hour. The last customers were drifting out. The pianist had closed the lid over the keyboard and was draining his last free beer. Granger nodded and said: 'I'll say good night now,' and walked along the passage and up the stairs to his room. Willi picked up a tray and started to collect empty pots and wipe spilled beer from the table tops. Hermann and Morris were the last to leave. Hermann, red-faced and red-eyed, emptied his tankard and replaced it upside down on the table.

'I'm going,' he said, and stood up, his belly-full of beer straining at the buttons. 'Haven't seen Gerda to-night' he said. 'Thought she'd be in later. Wouldn't have stayed if I'd known.' He pushed aside a chair and walked heavily past Willi to the door. Morris walked up the stairs without a word.

Willi took away their pots. He piled the empties on the bar top, knocking them together roughly, not caring about chipped rims or cracked stems. He thumped chairs on to table tops and on to wooden wall seats. He swept up spent matches, cigarette ends and screwed-up paper wrappers, then dragged a bucket of hot water across the dirt-streaked floor and set to work with soap-powder and a mop. He'd cleaned half the floor when Graf appeared from the kitchen.

'They're still out.'

'Who?'

'Gerda and Schmidt.'

'She knows what she's doing.' Willi straightened his back and stuck the mop into the bucket.

'Don't you care what happens to her?'

'She can look after herself.'

'You're too damn lazy.'

'He's a very important man.'

'Do you know how long they've been gone?'

'She'll not rush things.'

'I'll go on my bike and see if I can find them.'

Graf shook his head. He'd had one row with Gerda already to-day. He didn't want another.

'No,' he said, 'she'll be all right. She's done it before, yes,' and nodded his head, 'she's done it before.' Willi spat on the floor and wiped his forearm over his lips. He grasped his mop and held it like a club.

'Blast!' he said, 'blast and set fire to it!' and dug the mop into the tiles. He replaced tables and chairs, washed and dried the glasses. As he checked the till he heard the back door open and Gerda laugh.

'You're back then?' he heard Graf's voice say, then the kitchen door closed. He sat down to wait.

Kurt Schmidt could see the likeness between uncle and niece, the same hair-line over the high forehead, the same large eyes, though Graf's were faded and bloodshot. Only the mouth and chin were different. The old man's lips were weak, almost petulant, and his chin was not strong enough to balance the breadth and height of his forehead.

'Kurt wants to stay here the night. It's too late for him to drive back to Mainfurt and he'll be nearer to the Town Hall for the conference to-morrow,' she said.

'Well I'm not stopping him,' said Graf.

'Thank you,' said Kurt.

'Gerda will show you to the guest room.' Gerda accepted her uncle's easy capitulation without question.

'Good night, Herr Graf. One day I may be able to help you.' Graf nodded. Yes, he might need a powerful friend, one never knew these days.

He turned to Gerda and asked: 'Gerda, will you be coming down again?'

'I haven't forgotten Willi's supper,' she replied.

Kurt followed Gerda up the narrow flight of stairs along the first landing. The floor of his room sloped away to the window. Gerda drew the curtains, then stood indecisively by the door. For a moment the large area of the unknown seemed to stretch before her. She wanted to run to the security of Willi's arms, but she tightened the screws and forced herself to whisper: 'Good night.' She walked silently to the window.

'Gerda!' he called. She turned round slowly. 'I'll be thinking of you to-night, of you . . . and your father.' He kissed her gently, then said, 'I might be able to help him. . . .' She slipped out of his arms and out of the room.

Willi heard first Gerda and Schmidt walk up the stairs, then Graf walk down the corridor.

'I've helped myself to a large cognac, on the house,' said Willi.

'That's all right, my boy,' said Graf.

'What's happening to Schmidt?'

'Kurt? He's staying the night here—too far for him to drive to Mainfurt. He's staying for the conference to-morrow,' said Graf, idly turning over the pages of the takings' ledger.

'I suppose I'm in the way,' said Willi.

'No, no, my boy. Gerda's coming down to make your supper. She wouldn't forget that.' Graf poured himself a cognac, too drunk to remember his earlier pretence that he was cutting down. He pulled a stool up to the counter, opened the ledger and pretended to work out his accounts. Willi shook his head, then walked down the corridor. He watched Gerda from the kitchen door. He felt in his bones that he was losing her. For a while he stood silently, tempted to disappear without saying a word.

She looked up, saw him and walked over to the larder, her face expressionless. She took a large flat meat pie from the shelf, pushed it carelessly on to the table, then walked over to the stove.

'Gerda?'

'Yes?' she asked, her back towards him.

'Why don't you say something?'

'Eat your supper.' Now that they were together his anger dissolved. Just being with her was all he wanted. 'Eat your supper,' she said.

He sat down and cut a quarter out of the cold pie. Beer

usually made him hungry. He looked at the wedge, but his mouth was dry.

'Isn't it good enough for you?' she asked, her face expressionless.

'You know it is,' he said, then: 'I'm sorry about to-night.' She relented slightly and sat down. She said:

'You've no right to be so possessive.' He let the wedge of pie slide on to the plate, took out a clean white handkerchief, lifted his patch and wiped the eyeless socket. The smoke in the bar always made it run.

'Let me do it,' she said. She poured warm water into a tumbler with boracic and bathed the eye with cotton wool, her calm long fingers as gentle as a butterfly wing.

'I still love you,' he said.

'Thank you.'

'Do you still love me?'

'Sometimes.'

'When Schmidt's not around?'

'He's promised to help father,' said Gerda.

'More likely himself,' said Willi, unable to halt the words.

'That's not a nice thing to say.'

'It wasn't meant to be. I don't think he's a nice man. You obviously do, falling for his smooth line of talk.'

'It's not a line.'

'Don't be fooled. I listened to stories like his when I was young, listened and believed, but never again. He's not interested in you. He wants to steal your youth, wants to feed on you.'

'I know that.'

'But you're too clever to be caught.' Gerda tried to snuff out her doubts.

'I was seventecn when I left home,' said Willi. 'I was lucky. I came back, most of me. And now you ask if I believe the men who hold power.'

'He promised to help father.'

'What's a promise to him!'

'He'll keep it.' Willi laughed, then became serious.

'Gerda, I want you, your smile. I want you to bear my children. I want to work for you.' Gerda let the pad of cotton wool slide into the tumbler. She wiped his eye with a clean towel, then kissed him gently, but said nothing.

'Does dear Kurt know that Wolff's promised to help your father to escape? Does he know that you've taken over where your father left off?' asked Willi.

'There was no need to tell him that.'

'No need!' laughed Willi, 'he probably thinks it's his own irresistible appeal...'

'Does it matter what he thinks?'

'Or what I think...?'

'I don't like you when you talk like that,' she said. He swayed to his feet.

'Let me help you to the door,' she said. Willi laughed harshly.

'I can manage,' he said, and stood up. 'I'll take a quarter of pie—it'll give me something to do in the moonlight.'

'Before you go, Willi,' she said, her eyes looking at him as he always wanted them to look, 'thanks for the frock, and be careful about crossing the line.'

'Why the sudden concern?'

'Kurt knows about you.'

'He's bluffing.'

'He also knows something about this man who says he's from the brewery.'

'Did you tell Schmidt about the frock?'

'No.'

'Did he ask?'

'No.'

'Supposing he did. Supposing he offered to trade your father for me...'

'How do you know he hasn't?' she asked.

Willi thought he'd been a fool. He caught hold of her before it was too late. Gerda closed her eyes, and held Willi's arms tightly.

'Don't torture me, Willi. Help me. Oh God, help me.'

They stood close to each other a long time. Then Willi said:

'Will you walk part way home?' still with his arms round her waist. She nodded and wiped a tear from her eye. He opened the door and led the way across the cobbles to his bicycle. A warm wind drifted across the fields heavy with moisture and the scent of ripening crops. A night bird cried out in the distant woods and a rabbit shrieked in terror. The road led on and over the

lip of a hill and down again, cutting off all sight of the inn. They were alone, looking at a thousand stars, Gerda filled with the tragic beauty of a million light years stretching between the nearest star and the earth, Willi seeking words to express the beauty of the moment; both aware that the moment would soon pass.

Their footsteps halted on a hollow bridge. Wordlessly she stood on the crown of the narrow span, facing him, the pale moonlight giving depth and beauty to her eyes, touching her features with silver. The music of the stream below caressed her ears and slowly faded. She stood thinking only of Willi and herself, looking inwards, past the thrill of his body touching hers, past the excitement of her senses, past the safety-scaffold of her reason to what she believed the summit of experience.

'Why can't we always be like this?' asked Willi. She leant over the parapet and watched stray leaves float on the moonlit water caught in sudden eddies and thrown together, disappearing downstream out of sight. She shivered and drew her coat closer. The moon ran behind a cloud.

'Put your arms round me,' she said, and pressed her cheek against his chest, afraid of the loneliness and the shortness of the journey.

'Gerda,' he said. 'Let's get away.'

'I can't,' she said. They stood for a long time, clinging to each other. Then:

'I'd better go back,' said Gerda.

'Aye,' said Willi, 'you'd better go.' She kissed him again.

He watched her walk back towards the inn, disappear round the bend, then he climbed on his bike and free-wheeled down to the village, listening to two bottles of beer rattling in his pocket. He pushed the black patch away from his eye on to his forehead. The cool night air soothed the aching socket. He opened the gate and leant his bicycle below the window, unlatched the back door and walked straight into the high-ceilinged kitchen. His old grandmother was asleep in a rocking chair by the empty hearth, a shawl draped around her shoulders, her gnarled hands linked together in her lap. Willi walked across a patchwork rug and touched her cheek with his lips. She woke with a start. She looked round the room, blinking her eyes as if to say, where am I, then at Willi, then at the clock.

'I must ha' dozed off,' she said. Willi pulled the bottles from his pocket.

'Like a stout?' he asked, 'or are you too cold?'

She looked at the bottle and licked the wisps of hair that curled at the corners of her thin dry old lips. 'Nay,' she said, 'it's quite warm in here,' and pulled her shawl a little closer. Willi smiled and poured out the beer.

'Here you are, love,' he said. She held the glass daintily, pleased that he'd not forgotten, and sipped the stout as if it were champagne.

'A young man called to see your father while you were out this afternoon.'

'Who?'

'From the city. You're not in any trouble, are you?'

'Trouble.' laughed Willi. 'I'm never in trouble.'

The old girl smiled until only the shining black pupils of her eyes were visible between the parchment of her lids.

'I've known you a long time, Willi,' she said slowly, as if fond memories of his childhood were flowing through her mind, 'and I've never known you out of mischief.'

'I'm on the straight and narrow now.'

'Save your tales for the young lady at the inn. Hams and butter and sugar like you bring home aren't bought by part-time barmen.'

'My father stopped all that.'

'You take after your grandfather.'

'I miss Gran'dad.'

'He wasn't all he should've been!' she added quickly. 'I had to put up with a lot that I haven't told you.'

'What did this man want?'

'He spent an hour with your father in his study. Your father's still there.'

'Drink your stout, love. Time you were in bed.'

'I washed and ironed your shirt. You'll be nice and clean for to-morrow morning.'

'I shan't be needing it.' She tried to see the expression on his face.

'What's up?' she asked.

'Nothing. I'm tired.'

'What's happened?'

'Nothing; I tell you.'

'Has she turned you down?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Her up at the inn.'

'Mind your own business.' He stamped into the hall, then turned and walked back.

'I'm sorry, love,' he said. 'Didn't mean to shout, but don't ask about, well, you know what I mean.'

'You're not the only one with worries,' said Grandma.

'Don't tell me you've got troubles!'

'Your father has.'

'He doesn't need my help.'

Grandma looked at Willi, paused, then said: 'It's good for a man, when he's up against it, to have his son by his side.' Willi fingered the empty bottle and turned it round on the table.

'He's too proud to ask you,' she said. Willi walked over to her.

'He's still in the study?' he asked. She nodded her head. She watched him walk slowly down the corridor, tap on his father's door and walk in. She pottered round the room a few minutes before hobbling up the steep stairs. She stood on the top landing, short of breath, then waddled to her room and sat down abruptly on the edge of her bed still holding her handbag in her hands. She caught her reflection in the dressing-table mirror, saw bags under the eyes, wrinkles, no teeth, hair white, no neck to speak of; yet in herself she felt not a year older than nineteen, or nine if it came to that. She put her bag under her pillow and undressed, carefully washing herself before climbing into her nightie. She knelt by the bedside, as she did every night, except one Christmas when they'd put her to bed blind drunk, but that hadn't been her fault. Young Willi had mixed her drinks. She knelt at the bedside and said her prayers and asked God to protect all her loved ones and see herself safely through the night. Then she crawled into bed and was snoring in a moment.

* Herr Rummel looked up from his desk as Willi entered.

'Can I help you, father?' asked Willi. Herr Rummel stood up.

'Help?' he asked. Willi looked at the eyes set in dark shadows, at the pale almost grey face.

'I mean it,' he said. Herr Rummel motioned Willi into the easy chair by his side.

'You can,' he said. 'Take this job Grundel offered you. At least go and see him. Tell him I'm feeling very tired and might need his help.'

'When do you want me to go?'

'Any time. The sooner, the better.'

'Is that all?'

'You could call at my office before you go.'

'Why?'

'It might correct some harmful impressions. People think we don't get on together.'

'Good night then, father.'

'Good night, son. I think I'll go to bed now,' said Rummel.

CHAPTER SIX

WILLI walked out of the study, out of the house and picked up his bicycle and empty rucksack. He pedalled slowly through the sleeping village, past the Town Hall, past the church, and headed towards the woods and the rendezvous at the old barn. He leant heavily on the handlebars and stared at the front wheel, watching the tyre snake endlessly from under the front mudguard.

Before the war, as a boy, he'd enjoyed this ride to the woods, enjoyed being alone at night when everyone but the wild animals was asleep. He had marvelled at the way hedges and woods and grass belonged and fitted in. On the face of it there seemed to be a master-plan, a design, whether the sun or the moon shone, whether it rained or blew. Yet on looking closer he knew he would find ivy sucking the life from the noble tree, find woodlice in the bark and grubs in the fruit.

Troubled thoughts filled his mind as his eyes watched the front tyre. He hid his bicycle in the deep ditch alongside the bridle path, climbed the stile and sat on the top step. Somewhere he'd lost the ability to enjoy the things around him. He climbed

down the far side and walked over the worn, rounded stones of the path. An owl hooted in the woods. A stoat ran boldly across his feet, sat up on its haunches, looked at him and laughed, then dived into the undergrowth. Was that where it all led? A mad round of reincarnation. He shook his head. What did it matter if only Gerda loved him? Her love would satisfy all his desires, answer all his questions, take the sharp pain from the beauty of the fields and the woods.

He halted in the shadow of a high hawthorn. Someone had disturbed the partridges in the field. He listened to their rising danger calls and the rattle of their wings and wondered who the intruders were. Wolff and the two refugees, or the frontier police. He crawled through a gap in the hedge and squatted on his haunches. Two hundred paces away in the corner of the field leant a ramshackle wooden roof supported by three timbered walls. The grass grew high over rotten planks torn from their nails by the winter storms, leaving a skeleton gaunt and sinister in the moonlight.

Willi walked round two sides of the field close to the hedge. No sign of movement issued from the derelict shelter. He halted a stone's throw away and waited. The moon shone from beyond the shack. Twice he heard voices murmuring, once a cough, then the small compact figure of Wolff stepped from the shadows, and held its wrist up to the moon. Willi smiled and, lifting his feet high at each step and lowering them gently, ghost-walked slowly over the last stretch. He knocked on the wooden upright. The whispering inside stopped. Nothing disturbed the senses but the odour of thick weeds and decaying wood.

'Who's there?' asked Wolff, his voice harsh and dry.

'Come out,' said Willi, 'so that I can see you.'

Wolff recognized the voice.

'It's you,' he said. 'What are you trying to do, give them heart failure?'

'Come out,' said Willi. Wolff pushed the two refugees out of the shadows.

'Here they are,' he said. 'Let's get them over the line.'

One of the refugees was a huge man with a thick moustache that drooped down over the corners of his mouth. He moved

slowly on heavy feet but his bulk was reassuring. The other was a younger man, a head smaller, thin and nervous. Willi looked at the large, slightly protruding eyes over the moustache.

'Can you swim?' he asked.

'I don't sink readily.'

'And you?' He turned to the younger man who nodded that he could.

'Before you go,' said Wollf, 'I'd like a word in your ear.'

Willi turned his back on the refugees. Wollf walked close to him. He said: 'You ought to be in Mainfurt to-morrow.'

'I'll think about it,' said Willi.

'I should,' said Wollf. 'Granger will be there.'

'You bastard,' said Willi, and motioned the two refugees.

They jumped to attention.

'You been lived all your life in towns?' They nodded.

Willi looked at Wollf.

'You pick them, don't you?' Then to the refugees:

'We'll go slowly. No talking, not even if someone jumps out of nowhere. I'll see you to the frontier. Once you've crossed the line, keep to the roads with the moon either behind you or at your left shoulder. You got that?' The young man nodded quickly.

'You sound confident,' said the big man.

'I am, about myself,' said Willi. 'One last word. If you fall, relax.' He turned to the younger one 'You especially, relax,' then as if to encourage him, 'the guards can't shoot straight in this light.'

'See you to-morrow,' said Wollf.

'Don't run any risks, or do I need to tell you?' said Willi, and headed towards the rabbit woods and the horse-shoe bend, the two refugees following behind in single file.

He realized he was happy, that either as hunter or hunted, he was in his element. Here, in the open, everything could be trusted. The night birds only cried when disturbed. The rabbit squealed only when the stoat was at its tail. The head of cows was curious only when a man was behaving unnaturally, crawling on all fours, or a strange dog walked near. He knew the short urgent cry of the small birds when one of their number had been killed, the circling sweep and downward swoop of the black crows, the

love play of the plovers, the trailing wing of the partridge. These things he knew and loved. They could be trusted, but not man. One night he might patrol the line. The next he would rest under a bush, watch, perhaps sleep.

At the edge of each new field Willi stopped while the young man stood first on one foot, then on the other, his head twitching on his shoulders.

'You're very careful. You give me confidence,' whispered the older man, stroking his moustache. As he spoke a rabbit left the warmth of a hollow in the dry grass under the hedge and bounded away. The young man gasped. Willi motioned them both to crouch, then he left them. He was away half-an-hour. The first they knew of his return was when he beckoned them from over the hedge. 'You can go now,' he said to the big man. 'The river's at the end of the hedge. Keep to the line of the rapids. It's no more than waist deep. If you get separated wait for your partner at the lonely oak tree half-way up the hill. You'll be quite safe there.'

The big man held out his hand. As he shook Willi's he said:

'Don't trust that man Wolff,' then he grabbed his partner and hurried away. Willi gritted his teeth at the noise they seemed to make. He watched them move in and out of shadows and finally disappear. 'Don't trust Wolff!' Why had he said that?

Just as he was about to turn he saw a figure running blindly towards him, stumbling and falling in its haste. Willi stifled the first impulse to turn and run and looked beyond the fleeing man towards the river, trying to see if he was being followed, trying to see if the big man with the moustache was somewhere behind. Willi waited in the shadows and grabbed by the arm the younger of the two refugees as he floundered blindly past.

'What's happened?' he asked. 'It's me, Willi.' The young man's arms flew about wildly. Willi overpowered him, gently.

'They caught him. They were waiting on the far side of the river.'

'You bloody fool—on the far side, they'd be Western police! They're friendly enough.'

'No, no.'

'Of course they are.' Willi turned the trembling young man towards the river.

'Go on,' he said. 'Go back and cross that river before the patrol arrives.'

'No.' He shook his head and dug his heels in. 'I can't.'

'Tell me,' said Willi, 'just what are you going to do?'

The young man shook his head in despair.

'I don't know. I don't know.'

'If I leave you, you'd run on blindly, lose yourself and either bump into a patrol or cross the line without knowing. Now sit down awhile and think things over. I'll take you back to the river myself.'

'No,' he said.

'You mean that?'

'I can't.'

'If you don't cross the line they'll catch you on this side, then you'll tell them who helped you.'

'I can't. I daren't.'

'Here,' said Willi, 'pick up that stick and dig a hole in the ditch.' The young man looked puzzled.

'Go on!' said Willi, and gave him a push. The refugee picked up the stick and knelt down and started scraping. 'Longer than that,' said Willi, 'about six feet long and the width of the ditch.' The young man scraped on. then his movements became slower.

'Why am I doing this?'

'Get on with it,' said Willi, and took a jack-knife from his pocket and flicked open the blade.

'What are you going to do?'

'You're not going to talk to the police. I'll see that they don't capture you, one way or the other. Now start digging.'

'No, no, you can't. . . .'

'Start digging!' The young man stared at the blade, cold and shining in the moonlight. His eyes were large with fear and his hands trembled.

'You would . . .' he said. He looked at the patch over the cheekbone. 'No,' he whispered. 'No.' His lips hung loosely around his open mouth.

'Cross the line, or dig,' said Willi, leaning forward, ready to leap at the first sign of hysteria.

'I can't,' said the young man. 'Don't you know, we're not refugees, we're spies. If the Western police catch us, it's the end.'

‘What?’

‘Wolff works for Beradin. Wolff is Beradin’s undercover man!’ Willi thought quickly.

‘Don’t give me that,’ he said. ‘A likely story. You’re crossing the line. It’s this knife, or the Western police—take your choice.’ He nicked the flesh under the scared man’s chin.

‘Don’t. I’ll go, I’ll cross the river. I’m not afraid. I’ll cross the river.’

‘Don’t change your mind this time,’ said Willi.

The stick fell from the young man’s hands. He scrambled out of the ditch.

‘Follow me,’ said Willi, and contemptuously led the way.

He closed the jack-knife, and pushed it into his pocket and smiled grimly to himself. Wolff was Beradin’s undercover man! Wolff knew about Granger! As Willi walked cautiously towards the river the smile left his face. He believed it. But would the others believe him? He stopped at the bank. He glanced at the moon, high in the southern sky, shining down on a deserted stretch of river, touching the white bubbles of scum with fragile beauty and throwing dark shadows under the willows. He listened and heard only the flow of swift powerful water disturbed by stones irregularly placed on the river bed causing ripples and swirls along the line of the rapids. Willi turned and took hold of the young man.

‘Your friend will be waiting by the lonely oak tree. He’ll be there. Those police were friendly. Now down you go.’

The young man rushed past Willi and plunged headlong into the racing waters. He thrashed about, his body rising and falling as first one foot then the other touched the rocks for a tantalizing moment before being whipped away by the current. Willi saw him drifting across the line of the rapids towards the deep water, his head lifting above the surface, his hair streaming down his face in long black shining rats’ tails. Then, just on the edge of the rapids, he stood firm. Willi stepped back into the shadows, looked up and down the bank.

* The young man edged away from the calm surface of the deeps and slowly, swaying from side to side, reached the far side. He crawled on to the bank and sat down, his head between his knees. Willi saw two Western guards run along the bank top

and leap down. There was no struggle. As he was led away the young man looked towards Willi and shouted:

'You bastard,' then staggered uphill with a guard on either side.

Willi smiled to himself. Bastard, eh? He wasted no more time. He moved quickly down the hedgerow away from the river. With luck Wolff would never find out that his true identity was known.

Willi covered the four miles to the rabbit woods in five minutes over the hour. He vaulted a wooden fence and walked along the edge of a field of beet, his feet brushing leaves nibbled short by rabbits. His first snare had not been disturbed, but the run was clear. At the next one, out in the open, crouched a rabbit with its head close to the stake. It kicked its hind legs at the moon and tightened the wire round its furry neck. He bent down and held the frightened body in gentle fingers. The fur was warm and soft. The wire had eaten through into the flesh of the throat beneath. He unwound the wire, released the snare and held the rabbit by its kicking hind legs. He prepared the edge of his hand for the death blow behind the ears. Get it over with. Don't prolong the agony. He knelt down and stroked the frantic body. He could feel the madly beating heart in the palm of his hand. He turned its head towards the shadows of the wood.

'Go on,' he said. The rabbit jumped high, zig-zagged with blind panic, leapt high at every fifth step and disappeared between the trees. Don't be a fool, he thought. That won't win Gerda. That won't make her change her mind. She doesn't even know. Only traps caught things, but he didn't want to catch Gerda. She had to come willingly, willingly or not at all. No, she had to come. She had to come, even if it meant filthying his hands with deceit. Somehow or other he had to make her escape over the frontier before it was too late.

At his last snare a dead rabbit lay on its back flashing its white belly at the moon. He opened his rucksack and thrust in both snare and rabbit. He'd caught a rabbit, to eat. A man had to eat, had to hunt or pay someone else. That was the clever way. Pay someone else. See only the glistening meat on the plate. Let someone else do the dirty work. That was clever or lucky. Pick up a rabbit that had been hit by a car.

Why had Schmidt stumbled on Gerda at this moment in time. Why Gerda? Why not some other girl? Willi gathered dry sticks and walked well into the wood. He heaped them at the foot of a tree already blackened by previous fires. As the flames leapt up the trunk he piled on thicker logs. He lay back and as the smoke spiralled upwards between the overhanging branches and set the leaves dancing, he tried to find peace of mind among the embers, but even the camp fire failed to soothe the ache in his chest. He wanted her there to share it. And Schmidt might take her away without even trying, might take her without effort.

He started back, his feet finding their own way to the stile. He jumped on to his bicycle. As he passed the Collective Farm a cock crowed at the false dawn. He slowed down by the churchyard, stopped and rested a foot on the low crumbling wall. He hooked his rucksack over the handlebars and stared at the moss-covered slabs rising from the shadows. That's where it ends. He looked up at the grey spire towering above the trees. The village had never been rich, yet they'd spent time and labour building the church. He stepped off his saddle and jumped over the wall, walking between the over-grown graves, drawn slowly to the door set deep in the weathered stone archway. He tried the iron handle and found it unlocked. The hinges creaked as he pushed and the creaks echoed through the hollow vault. His hands felt for a wall and his fingers touched a wooden rail smoothed and polished by a craftsman long since buried. Willi closed his good eye and followed the rail which led him safely through the darkness to the first pew. He edged sideways and sat down.

They had found time to build this church and to worship and to work in the fields, and to rear families. They had believed in God. If only he could believe. There was peace in here. The first light from the east caught the features of a glass face in the painted windows facing him. It would be easy to give in, to close his mind to the questions posed by the world outside. That would not be believing, but surrender. He couldn't run away with questions unasked, unanswered, couldn't run away because he had lost Gerda. He couldn't lose Gerda. He must fight for her. There was nothing more important.

As the light strengthened he saw a dark figure bent as if in

sleep. The figure rose and faced him. The old priest's face was thin and grey, the eyelids heavy.

'I heard you enter, Willi,' said Sammer.

'I'm going now.'

'Did you find what you came for?'

'I had a rest,' said Willi. The pastor nodded his white-haired head.

'Good,' he said. 'Let me walk with you to the door.'

'I can find my own way.' Willi frowned as he walked alone to the doorway. He stood still a moment, then turned and said, 'Good morning, pastor,' brusquely. Though he meant to walk out into the grey morning his legs did not budge. He stood there, sharing the moment, held by the expression of compassion on the old man's face.

'Come back whenever you feel the need.' Willi looked at the glass face above the old man's head, at the yellow crescent glowing in the first light.

'Did you come here to-night to pray?' asked Sammer. Willi shook his head.

'Or did you come to see Farice?'

'I don't know.'

'I know what's going on,' said Sammer.

'Is Farice here?' asked Willi, abruptly.

'He's in the house, asleep I think.'

'Can I go and wake him?'

'God's blessing be with you.' The old man watched Willi turn and walk down the well-worn path to the house beyond the church. Sammer shivered and pulled his robes closer.

Willi paused before the front door, then pressed the bell push firmly. The ring pierced the silent corridors and lingered for an age. The door opened. Farice stood tall, dignified, immaculate in black. 'Come inside, Willi,' said Farice, his eyes not leaving Willi's not even to see if any watchers had observed the visit. Willi followed him into a spartan study softened only by rows of leather-bound volumes leaning at imprecise angles on open bookshelves, civilized by the taste and design of old furniture and the warmth of pine logs burning in the open grate.

'You have news for me?' asked Farice. Willi shook his head.

'Our friends over the frontier, you saw them?'

'That can wait,' said Willi. 'I'm worried about Gerda.'

'She's doing her best,' said Farice, 'but she's a poor substitute for her father. I know what you mean.'

'No, you don't. I'm worried for her, for her own sake.'

'Is she unwilling?' asked Farice. 'Does she want to withdraw?'

'She's too young to know what she's doing.'

'We mustn't make it too difficult for her.'

'Too difficult!'

'I explained her duty simply. She understands, not perhaps on a very high level, but in her own terms.'

'All right,' said Willi. 'All right! Now you can tell her to mind her own business. You get that? You can tell her to stay at home.'

'Are you out of your mind?'

'Listen!' said Willi, trying hard to keep his emotion under control. 'Gerda's more than a brick for building a church. I love her. She's important here, now.'

Farice walked up to Willi and put both hands on his shoulders.

'Willi, my dear Willi; you're carrying a great load, perhaps too great. We can't work everything out ourselves. We must trust God. When His will is made clear, you will realize that all was for the best. Be content doing your own job.' Willi brushed Farice's hands away.

'Will you tell Gerda to mind her own business?'

'This is her business.'

'You'll let her go on, getting deeper and deeper?'

'Only God can tell her, in His own way, that she has a task to fulfil more important than fighting for His Church.'

'But she's not doing it for the Church, but for her father.'

'She's carrying on where her father left off, Willi,' said Farice. 'Why do you struggle like this? Give yourself, body and soul, to Him, then you'll be spared this dreadful self-torture, then you'll see that Gerda is fulfilling herself.' Willi stared hard at Farice.

'You really believe that, don't you?'

'I know.'

'And you won't order Gerda to stay out?'

'I cannot.'

'Then I must!'

'Do you think that is the way to happiness?' asked Farice.

'My kind of happiness,' said Willi, and stamped away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WOLFF waited until Willi and the two refugees had turned the corner of the hedgerow then walked brazenly across the open field towards his car parked on the cart-track. Inside an hour he'd be back in the city with solid concrete under his shoes, where he could pick up a telephone and find out what was happening. He didn't like the way things were going. Beradin acted as if the ghost of Herlich was already at his shoulder, haunting him. He climbed over the gate, unlocked the car door, slid into the driving seat, switched on the radio and waited for the two-hourly news bulletin. He drove slowly towards the main road, turned left, then switched on his headlights to see how many rabbits he could run down.

He thrust his foot to the floorboards and chased a white tail along the shoulder of the road, and imagined rather than felt the thud against the mudguard. The first, he thought. Five would be a record. Five between Heisenach and Mainfurt. Snuff them out. That was the way. Why waste time arranging things? Where are these rabbits? He glanced at the speedometer and lifted his foot slightly. He was going too fast. Ahead he saw the lights of Mainfurt. Only one rabbit. He didn't like that. It was a bad omen. Only one rabbit between Heisenach and Mainfurt. They were keeping out of his way to-night, as if someone had warned them. He'd better see Beradin and find out what was happening.

He drove round the north circular road to the suburb on the hill. The guard at the gate recognized Wolff but kept him waiting five minutes while he telephoned for permission to allow entry. The iron gate swung open and Wolff accelerated up the curving drive under the bright arc-lamps. Another guard conducted him from the main door of the mansion through the silent entrance hall along hushed corridors to Beradin's study on the first floor. As soon as they were alone in the room Beradin stood up and asked: 'What's gone wrong?'

'Nothing yet,' said Wolff, and walked across to a leather arm-chair. 'But I'm not happy.'

'You're not paid to be happy,' said Beradin. Wolff stood by the chair.

'We're getting nowhere. All this setting the stage . . . what do we gain by it?'

'Sit down,' said Beradin, 'and tell me what happened at Heisenach.' Wolff remained standing.

'Young Rummel took them across the line.'

'And you told him to attend the meeting of our precious reactionaries?'

'Yes.' Wolff sat down slowly.

'And our English friend, Morris?'

'He is baiting the trap.'

'Who else is at the inn?'

'Schmidt, young Rummel, and someone from the brewery.'

'Someone from the brewery?'

'He's all right.'

'Who says that?'

'Schmidt.'

'What does Schmidt know?'

'As you say, Comrade.'

'Go there yourself and see Morris and this stranger. There's a funny smell about the timing of this brewery man's arrival. He might well be Granger.' Wolff leaned forward in his chair. His voice was persuasive.

'Why don't we just eliminate Grundel and Hermann? No one will stand up to us once they are out of the way.'

Beradin shook his head.

'We have to give five hundred members of the Praesidium something to take home to their soviets. We have to convince the Army. So we organize a rebellion to discredit the Liberals and a plot to prove the need for increased security measures.' Wolff smiled to himself.

'Let's just eliminate them,' he said, 'then there'll be no one to convince, no one to discredit.'

'I don't kill just for the love of killing,' said Beradin.

'Of course not,' said Wolff, still with the unholy smile lurking at the corners of his eyes, 'only if we have no alternatives.'

'The underground must strike as soon as it hears the news of Herlich's death. Once it comes into the open, the Liberals are discredited. Everyone will turn to me.'

'I'd rather not wait. Let's snuff the Liberals out first and manufacture the evidence afterwards.'

'I need the proof.'

'We know who they are. Let's snuff out Grundel and Hermann. Then we can tie them all in a pretty parcel for public exhibition.'

'You've forgotten the Army.'

'The bigger the scare, the more docile they'll be.'

'No,' said Beradin. 'We do it my way. The Army haven't forgotten the arrest of General Slitz yet.' Wollf shrugged his shoulders. He stood up.

'Is Herlich still alive?' he asked. Beradin stared at Wollf, his eyes black and inscrutable.

'No announcement has been made yet,' he said. Wollf nodded his head so that he could avoid Beradin's cold stare, then walked quickly to the door. Beradin called after him, 'Check on the brewery man!'

Beradin squeezed the bridge of his nose with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, narrowed his eyelids, but did not blink. He walked to the chair behind his desk and sat down. If only Herlich hadn't failed at the end. Human nature was a poor thing. If left alone every man would be selfish, self-indulgent. If the workers were given freedom they would indulge their personal whims, they would create demands for luxury goods. They would want more leisure. Strength would be turned into weakness. Then the enemy at the gates would break in and the hope of mankind be lost.

If only his position had been secure enough to do as Wollf suggested! But the Army was following a line of its own and the newly elected Praesidium was sensing its potential power. Why? Because they knew counsels were divided. If he appeared to seize power, absolute power, both Army and Praesidium would drop into Grundel's lap. Grundel was cunning. His policy offered both Army and Praesidium more power. He was bribing their support. Beradin banged his fist on the table. Seizing power to strengthen the State was one thing, but seizing the power of State by endangering the State itself was treachery. Did the Army really believe that Grundel would honour his promises once he held the reins? Didn't the Praesidium realize

that power, shared was power reduced? Grundel could not be trusted. No, Grundel was manoeuvring and his antics might cause the whole edifice to crumble. Beradin shook his head. The State came first. He could have seized power by telling Wollf to 'snuff out' his opponents but that too would have endangered the State. He didn't want power just for the sake of power. He wanted it to do good, to see the State mighty and all powerful, the mightiest of all States, eventually the only good and true State on earth. Fortunately, thought Beradin, his men held key posts throughout the country, and were responsible only to himself. Then he thought of Herlich's death and unaccountably his limbs trembled. For five minutes he crouched. Then the mood wore off. He shook his head like a boxer recovering from a heavy blow.

He sat down at his desk and read reports smelling of anxiety from his men in the field, tried to draft confident instructions and had cleared the business on his desk just as the floodlights were switched off. He walked over to the window and looked down at his orchard, bright in the oblique morning light. He unhooked an overall from a wardrobe, drew on a pair of gloves and descended to the toolhouse. He chose a pair of hand clippers with wickedly curving blades, clicked them to test the spring and approached an apple tree heavy with fruit. He started with the lower branches, shearing off many leaves so that almost the whole of the tree's energy would be diverted to the essential task of enlarging the fruit. The clippers worked smoothly, running up and down the branches, snipping, biting cleanly. The leaves fluttered to the ground and piled ankle high. Then one fell with a thud. Beradin kicked it and saw a large round apple. He frowned momentarily then renewed the attack. The clippers reached higher; his arms were tiring. Another apple thudded to the ground. He'd made a mistake, two mistakes, but accidents were bound to happen and the gain would more than compensate for the loss of the few. On and on he clipped, aware now only of the sound of the shears and the shining blades biting through wood and leaf.

He looked at the clippers working on their own, dragging his hand after them. He didn't like the look of the bare branches with the naked apples stuck on here and there. It offended

something deep inside him, but he couldn't stop now. He had to see the thing through.

As the clippers attacked the last branch he sniffed a sweet odour and noticed that a fine froth was growing on the ends of the twigs he had cut. At last he stood back. The branches reached blindly into the sky, holding out apples like small shining balls tied on with string. Beyond the apples was a dark cloud encroaching on the sun, and a sharp wind pulled at Beradin's overalls.

He returned the clippers to the toolshed and walked into the house for a bath. Refreshed, he entered the private part of the house where his family lived. He walked into his son's bedroom and stood looking down at the twisted sheets and blankets.

'Nicki,' he said, and shook the young boy by the shoulders. Nicki awoke, pale and wondering.

'Had another restless night?' asked Beradin. The lad's eyes stopped roving as he realized where he was. The sun shone reassuringly through the closed window. He sat up and looked at the tangled bed-clothes.

'I think I had another bad dream, father.'

'What was it?'

'The same one . . . but I can't remember what it was.'

Beradin sat down on the edge of the bed.

'What happens when we die, father?' asked Nicki. Beradin put his hand round his son's shoulder and stared out of the window. The dark cloud was close to the sun. Could he tell his son that death was the end? Could he say there was no God, that life was an accident? Was that all the comfort he could offer his son? He looked down into the clear eyes of the eleven-year-old, at the dark shadows beneath.

'Is that what's worrying you?' he asked. Nicki nodded his head and thrust it against his father's chest. 'No one knows,' said Beradin. 'No one has been back to tell us. But whatever does happen, I shall go before you and when you go I'll be there ahead of you.'

'You won't go yet, for a long time, will you, father?'

The dark cloud had covered the sun and the room felt cold.

'No,' said Beradin. 'Not for a long time. Now get dressed and we'll have breakfast together.' Nicki made no move but looked steadily at his father.

'You don't believe there's anything afterwards, do you?' Beradin felt the probing finger of his son's question nail the raw.

'There's nothing, nothing,' he said, and with his mouth still around the words turned and looked at his son, not straight in the eye, but fearfully at his lips. Nicki was strangely calm.

'The teacher says that,' he said, 'but some of the boys have heard that in the churches they say there's a life after death, that everyone has a soul that lives forever.'

'Which boys . . . ?'

Nicki remained silent, then: 'Oh, just boys,' he answered. 'They hear things.'

'No one's ever returned. . . .'

'I think I'll believe in the soul,' said Nicki with a simple faith that sent a burning light into the dark confines of Beradin's mind. 'It makes me feel so much better.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

GERDA'S uncle rested his elbows on the closed ledger and thought of his wife. He felt a great sadness in his heart. On rare occasions when Gerda laughed and her eyes sparkled with merriment she conjured up an image which tortured his conscience. He grasped his hands tightly across his forehead. He must find Gerda and say: 'If you love Willi, seek happiness with him before it is too late. Forget all the words of duty that were poured into your mind before it awoke to full consciousness. Forget subtle emphasis on family and on State. Be yourself. Live and love. Life is short and when you find out the fallacy your youth will have fled. You will be old and disillusioned, like me, a poor old man.' He shook his head in a pity which was large enough to include Gerda. He poured himself another glass of cognac. He was weakening, he thought. He must pull himself together. Graf drank the cognac neat.

Gerda turned out the light in the kitchen, listened to her uncle clinking bottle on glass, then hurried up the narrow stairs. She hesitated on the landing by the door to Kurt's room, then walked

on slowly to her own. From her window she looked over the open fields to the village houses clustered round the church for protection. She thought of Willi and she thought of her father alone in some deep cell. She thought of Kurt lying awake. She walked across the dark floor to the wardrobe, took off her frock and hung it on a peg. She poured water into a bowl and bathed herself. Her arms and shoulders were smooth and golden. She felt as if the sun had seeped into her blood, and drugged her limbs until her body pleaded for sleep and her mind for sweet dreams. She stood naked in the shadows, motionless in the dark corner of the room, listening. She heard the heavy footsteps of her uncle climbing the stairs, heard them stop outside Kurt's door, then again outside her own. She heard the handle turn and saw the door open and her uncle's dark form enter the room. He stood in the square of moonlight at the foot of her bed. He snatched up her nightgown and threw it down.

'The bitch!' he said out loud, and turned angrily towards the door.

'Uncle!' said Gerda. Graf twisted and peered unseeingly into the shadows.

'Gerda! Why aren't you in bed?'

'What are you doing here?'

'I came to say good-night.'

'You came to see if I was still in my room!'

'No. . . .'

'If you were more of a man you'd work for your brother's freedom instead of drinking yourself insensible.'

'What could I do?'

'As much and more than I can. If I hadn't been in this room you would have been to blame!'

'Don't shout. You'll waken our guests.'

'One of them's still awake, waiting for me!'

'You wouldn't. . . .'

'Wouldn't I? I'm only a woman. What else can a woman do?'

Uncle's brain worked slowly.

'You're not doing this for your father,' he said, 'but because you want to.' Gerda laughed.

'You couldn't understand the bond. All you think of is yourself, your soft, sentimental self! *You've* lost a brother! *You* have

an ungrateful niece! You, you, you, all the time! Everything is judged as it affects you! If my body will buy my father's freedom then it will be a bargain and neither you nor anyone will stop me.'

'Not even Willi?'

'Get out!' she said.

Graf stood still, tried to remember the words he had wanted to say before his suspicions had blinded him, but his mind was clouded with alcohol. Gerda saw him turn and walk slowly into the corridor. She threw away the towel and smoothed her fingers over her shoulders. She looked through the window down to the silent sleeping village. If only things had been different. If only she could give herself wholeheartedly to Willi, but she could not think of herself while her father was in prison. Stronger forces, whose origin she could not trace, made her reject as unworthy the desire of self-realization. She must sacrifice everything for her father. That was the urge of conscience. And she knew conscience came from God. Conscience! She could not remember the praise and blame, the punishments and presents that had erected between her conscience and the outside world a distorting lens. All she knew was that duty to father came before duty to self, that Willi's sweet and wholesome love was a kind of insidious temptation. Yet the look of anguish in his eyes when she hurt him cut straight through the distorting lens to her heart and built up doubts that grew larger with every victory for the false image and built up a force that might one day give clear vision.

She slipped into her dressing-gown, tip-toed into the corridor, avoided the loose planks and listened outside Kurt's door. She tapped lightly with her fingernail. She pictured him lying awake, as he had said, thinking of her, waiting for her to fulfil her part of the bargain. She tapped a little louder and pressed her ear against the panel. She bit her lip. Very faintly she heard the floorboards creak. She felt the handle turn through her fingers, and for the first time wondered what she was going to say.

'Kurt,' she said, 'it's Gerda,' and squeezed through the narrow gap and stood inside his room with her back to the wall. He looked at her, his eyes heavy with sleep, his brain doped. She waited for his words of understanding. He smiled and stepped towards her.

'You said you'd help my father,' she said, the first words thrown up by her mind.

'I knew you'd come,' he said. Gerda could see the expression on his face. Her fists pressed against her thighs, against the blood flooding at the touch of his hands.

'Darling,' he said. 'I knew you'd come. I was waiting.'

She wondered why he'd been so long answering. She lowered her head and turned away.

'Darling,' he said, 'we're meant for each other.' His words seemed flat like tin, and rusted at the edge. They failed to satisfy. Her body cringed at the touch of his arms. She held her elbows across her breasts. She felt no spiritual exaltation, her mind felt cold, but her pulse had quickened.

Kurt rested his weight first on one foot, then on the other, tired after the long hours on the frontier. He thought of the bed, warm and comfortable. He kissed her head.

'It's stronger than both of us,' he murmured. 'I can no more control my feelings than you can. That's why I knew you'd come. That's why you came.' He knew he was saying the right things.

She looked through the window at the lane threading between the fields down to the village, the road along which Willi cycled every day. She remembered his words: 'I'm the only one who really loves you, who wants to worship you and your body for yourself.' She felt Kurt's hands on her shoulders, felt the touch of his body at her back, felt the hands caress her arms and the fingertips gently brush the outer curve of her breasts. Kurt felt her lean against him, felt her body tremble. He kissed her gently at the nape of the neck. He turned her slowly and imprinted on her mouth the smile that curved his lips. But the kiss was dry and dusty, spoilt by thoughts of his wife, spoilt by tractors and ploughshares.

'You will help father,' she whispered. He drew her by the arms on to the bed and kissed her savagely on her passive lips, seeking relief from the torment of frustration, seeing her as his wife, as the forces which he could not control, in some ways as the system itself. Instead of sublimation he achieved no more than deflation.

She submitted to the uninspired sweat and odour, then, too

quickly, pushed his limp body away. 'You will help father now?' she said.

He felt a sharp spark of anger kindling in his frustration and raised himself on one elbow. Her bare shoulder was white in the moonlight, white and clammy.

'The only reason you came was to help your father.'

She said nothing. He felt the hatred grow.

'He'll stay where he is!' She said nothing, but listened to the throbbing in her ear pressed against the pillow. At last she moved.

'It's all been so easy,' she said, 'and now you'll not even keep your part of the bargain.' She stood up, her limbs clogged with refuse, her nerves slack. She felt for the handle and opened the door. She stepped into the corridor, and crept to the bathroom and soaked herself in cold water, strong with disinfectant. An hour later she sat down on the edge of her bed. The curtains rustled at the window and a floorboard creaked slowly back into position. She slid her bare feet under the bed-clothes and lay rigid with the counterpane up to her ears. She turned to her tattered pride and found in it no salve. She wanted to run away, be alone, but she couldn't live in an empty room.

She thought of the frock Willi had smuggled across the frontier. She'd only wanted to help her father, but she'd been wrong. She knew now that she could never again give herself to a man other than Willi, not even for her father. But her questioning went no deeper. She added one more doubt to the unorganized pile that heaved uneasily in her mind and left it at that. She still had to help her father. Loyalty to him was still the key to her actions. She thought of the underground movement, of her father's own friends. They could help him escape. Farice now became her father's best hope. As her eyes closed she thought uneasily of Willi, as if not only Willi but a voice she recognized as her own was pleading with her, calling her from the other side of a locked door. She dozed restlessly, but still made no effort to think out her problem. At last, as consciousness fled before fatigue she admitted she could only be happy with Willi, but failed to take the only action that would make that happiness possible.

Kurt heard the lock click and beat the pillow with his fist. His temper was foul with frustration. He reached for his jacket

and found cigarettes and matches. He drew hard and filled his lungs with smoke. He ought to feel happy with his night's work. He walked restlessly round the room, his bare feet padding softly on the carpet and on cool polished wood. A desire satiated should lead somewhere, should give some satisfaction. He had changed. He no longer felt elation at overcoming an obstacle, achieving an end. Somewhere he'd taken the wrong turning.

He flicked the cigarette through the window and watched the glowing butt describe a smooth red arc against a background of black velvet then disappear below the sill. A beautiful young girl had tasted like a mouthful of dust. He was a high official, yet he couldn't sleep at night. He had a large powerful car. Had he? Was it his car? Was it his house? No. Both house and car went with his office. A stroke of a pen and office and car and house would vanish like a postcard flicked sideways. Was that all life had to offer? Was it all he wanted from life? He looked out of the window over the high bank and the hedge opposite.

His thoughts raced in a manner which frightened him. He thought of Herlich, dying in his room surrounded by the best doctors and scientists the State could provide. Herlich, a dying old man, soaking in sodium baths, putting his faith in science and dying just the same. Could everything a man wanted be provided by the State, even a perfect material State? Herlich with frail hands trying to grasp at life! Was it to serve the State still longer? Or was he afraid of the night vapours forming into the faces of the dead? Was that why Herlich had worked at night? Kept them all working? Schmidt felt the panic gripping. The State could neither help nor sustain when the hour came.

He looked round the strange room. Gerda had gone. He was alone. He climbed into his trousers and dressed. He would waken old man Graf. He opened the door and thought of Leila, alone in the flat, waiting for the first pains. Instead of looking for Graf he rushed along the landing, down the stairs, fumbled with the chains and bolts. He turned the handle, stepped into the yard.

The car gleamed in the moonlight as he backed out on to the road and headed towards the village at the fading red glow in the sky from the uranium mines. The power of the engine at his foot and the controls at his finger-tips reassured him. The car responded smoothly, gliding over the moon-silvered road

curving between the hedges. He'd wriggled out of tight corners before and he'd do so again. Yet the feeling of dissatisfaction persisted.

He slowed down through the village and noticed lamps burning in some of the upstairs cottage windows. Children's bedrooms, he thought, or perhaps even adults'. He thought of hundreds, thousands, perhaps millions awake with a common fear in the small hours. Some keeping the lights burning all through the dark night, others sleeping only when the first light broke over the horizon, and one old man, surrounded by doctors, taking brine baths.

He stopped the car outside the churchyard. He remembered the long childhood months when his father lay on the bed in the kitchen, how he had watched him eat thin tasteless gruel and slowly lose strength. Out of that memory had sprung the determination to help the helpless. He had gained power, but only the power to demand sacrifices.

He looked past the tombstones, past his father's grave to the church. Somewhere along the line he'd taken the wrong turning. A light flickered beyond the stained glass window. He saw a dark shadow float away from the door set deep in the church wall. He realized his heart was thumping loud in his throat. He slowly opened the car door and stood on the gravel, one hand still gripping the handle. He slammed the door and waited in the echoing silence before walking down the path towards the church. He laughed uncertainly at his fears and found himself thinking of his wife, gaining strength from the knowledge that she had loved him, perhaps still did.

A faint light edged the door and grew larger as he pushed it open. Two candles burnt with statuesque flames below the altar and washed the church walls with a pure yellow light and threw deep shadows in between the pews. He walked down the aisle towards the defenceless back of the kneeling priest and stood a stride away, looking at the head and bare neck, bent in prayer.

He felt unseen eyes watching him just as he was watching the priest. But he was no longer afraid. The calm soothed his fears. This tranquillity was missing from the world outside. He knew he was willing to hear the word of God, willing to believe. He remembered the good priest who had visited his father, bringing

small parcels of fresh meat and kits of milk, the good priest Sammer. Perhaps if he could see Sammier . . .

At last the kneeling figure rose and turned, a young man who at first stared unseeingly. The eyes gradually focused and the look of being elsewhere faded. The eyelids narrowed and the glance became hostile.

'You!' said Farice the young priest, 'are you still not satisfied?' Kurt shook his head slowly.

'No,' he said, 'I wanted . . .'

'Get out!' whispered Farice the young priest, 'haven't you done enough?'

'I've been mistaken,' said Kurt. 'I came because I needed . . .'

'You came to see who was here,' said Farice.

'No. I need help. I thought I might find it here.'

'What sort of help?'

'I don't know.'

Kurt looked beyond his inquisitor to the rich furnishings of the altar, the coloured tapestries glowing in the still candlelight. 'Somewhere I've gone wrong. My life is crumbling away between my fingers.' The hatred in the young priest's eyes softened.

'Will you do as I say?' he asked. Kurt examined the face.

'It's not a bargain I came to seek, but understanding and help.'

'The road back will not be easy. You will have to make sacrifices.' Kurt frowned. He was seeking kindness and understanding.

'I'm lonely,' he said.

'You must prove your repentance by sacrifice.'

'What must I do?'

'You must make a public statement. Denounce the Government.' Kurt shook his head.

'You don't understand. . . .'

'I understand. Your sins weigh heavily on your conscience. You have persecuted the Church. Now you want forgiveness and will give nothing in return.'

'They would not let me make a public declaration. They would kill me.'

'How else could you prove your penitence?'

'Proof! My heart tells me my life is empty. I came seeking help.'

'Denounce your comrades. That is the price. The road back is steep and rutted.' Kurt clenched his fist and struck the corner of the pew at his side, three times slowly. He shook his head.

'I can't,' he said. 'I don't want to die.'

'You have stood by while others died.'

'A public declaration won't restore their lives.'

Farice drew himself to his full height. He stretched out a long finger stiff with anger and pointed down the aisle.

'Get out!' he hissed. 'I'm not afraid of you.' Kurt slowly turned. The young priest watched him walk out of the door. He crossed himself and felt strong in God.

'Who was that?' asked the voice at his elbow. He turned and saw Father Sammer.

'That? Schnidt. Kurt Schmidt.'

'What did he want?'

'Want? What could he want?'

'You drove him away!'

'In God's name.'

'You did it in God's name? By what right did you forbid God to Kurt Schmidt?' The old priest ran down the aisle, his garments swishing around his legs. He stood bareheaded in the moonlight, and watched the gleaming car slide away. He shook his head and lowered his clenched fists from his chest to his side.

'God forgive us,' he said. Then he thought: No, don't be too harsh. Once he too had been certain, had believed without doubts. Now . . . if he could have given comfort to that one man, that would have been enough. If he could have helped him believe, that would have been something. He stood alone in the moonlight and felt very old and tired. Perhaps God too is tired. Perhaps He is looking for one man who can say, I seek **nothing**, no life eternal, yet I rejoice in your creation. One man to keep Him company up there. Yet the fact of this life makes the **next** possible, for if one accident happens, so might another. If we cannot find reasons *for* this life, of what value are our reasons *against* the next. If we accept this life, we might as well accept the next, for both are equally as impossible.

He walked along the path towards the house. He felt very

tired. Death was no longer fearful. It welcomed him home with loving arms. Dear God, don't wash Your hands of us. There's so much to love in us. Sammer shook his head. His thoughts rambled on. He was too tired to put them in any sort of order.

CHAPTER NINE

GRANGER listened to the floorboards creaking in the corridor outside. He raised himself on one elbow and turned up the wick in the oil lamp. A yellow light flooded the wall and threw shadows on the floor. The door opened. Granger slipped his feet on to the floor and into his shoes, then recognized the intruder. Morris stood trying to find words, then they burst out: 'Can we cross the frontier to-night?' he asked.

'To-night!' said Granger.

'Now, this minute! To-morrow will be too late!'

The foreboding that had lain silent ever since his arrival at the inn stirred in the background of Granger's mind.

'What exactly do you mean?' he asked, his voice deliberately slow and calm.

'I think they suspect you. It slipped out . . . while I was talking to Schmidt . . . that I had a baby son.'

'And he wondered how you knew . . . ?' Morris nodded.

'Why haven't they done something then?' asked Granger.

'I don't know . . . but we can't wait.'

'We've no guide.'

'Don't you know the way?' Granger laughed softly. He walked close to Morris and stared at his face.

'Why have you changed your mind?' he asked.

'I want to see my son.'

'Is that all?'

'All? Haven't I a right to see him?'

'Demand your rights from your new masters.'

'They would bring my wife and child here.'

Granger walked uncasily to the window and looked outside. 'They don't guard you very well with the frontier so near.'

‘What do you mean?’ asked Morris.

‘We’ll see,’ said Granger. He laced up his shoes, pushed a bolster under the bedclothes, looked round the room, then said: ‘If this is a trap, I’ll kill you.’

They crept along the corridor and down the stairs, through the kitchen to the back door. Granger slid back the bolts and looked across the moonlit yard. He tried to forget his fatigue and suspicions in the excitement of action and the prospect of an early return home. Morris had stopped thinking. He moved mechanically, his mind lost between gladness that he had made the decision to return and face the music and fear that they would be caught.

The night remained quiet for a moment longer, then they heard a car engine and saw two beams of light wave stiff-armed over the hedge tops.

Granger led the way across the moonlit cobbles, past the shadows by the stables into the orchard. They stopped and turned as the headlamps swung in a wide, blinding arc across their faces and shone into the orchard. They heard the spinning, racing wheels squirting pebbles against the stable doors. Then the headlamps switched off and left thin, snaking filaments glowing briefly red. Granger and Morris stood stiff with shock as the car doors opened. Granger was the first to move. He thumped Morris on the shoulder then dodged away between the trees, bending double to protect his face from low hanging branches. His feet flew over the ground and no message of fatigue reached his brain. There was only one thought reigning in his mind, to escape home to his wife and children. Then as he calmed down he remembered Morris and the reason for the mission. He waited at the edge of the trees and grabbed Morris as he trod on a dead branch which cracked like a rifle shot. ‘That was close,’ gasped Morris. ‘I don’t think they saw us.’

‘Listen,’ said Granger. ‘We have four hours of this moonlight then one hour’s darkness before dawn. The frontier’s five miles away. We can just about do it.’

They vaulted the low wooden fence guarding the potato field and stumbled more than walked over the ankle-breaking ridges which ran at right-angles to their line of march. Sour smells of decay rose from patches of blighted haulms.

'Get down!' hissed Granger. They knelt between the ridges.

'What is it?' asked Morris, searching all sides of the field.

'Listen.' The fence creaked behind them.

'They did see us!' whispered Morris.

'Run for it,' said Granger. 'If we can reach those woods we stand a chance!' But running was impossible. The ridges either tripped them up if they trod in the trough, or crumbled if they trod on the crest.

'It's the same for our pursuers,' thought Granger until he saw dark figures a hundred yards away outflanking them in the next field.

'Why the hell had we to choose a potato field!' he said.

'Look!' cried Morris, and pointed at the two moon-bathed figures cowering over the stubble of a part-harvested cornfield.

Granger strangled the despair in his throat. 'Blast!' he grunted. 'Now what?'

'Crawl! We'll have to try to fool them. Make for the far corner of those woods,' said Morris.

'No!' snapped Granger, 'back the way we came!'

They crawled along slowly below the level of the potato leaves. The soil was dry and stony. The leaves rustled loud in their ears. Knees and hands grew sore until, at last, the potatoes ended and the fence was a yard away. They lay flat and listened.

'Come on,' whispered Granger and slithered under the lowest bar into the orchard. Twigs crackling marked their path between the apple trees. They skirted the outbuildings, followed the wire-netting of the chicken-run, then looked up and down the road.

'Quickly!' said Granger. They darted across, found a gap in the hedge, then walked past the inn. Morris caught hold of Granger's arm.

'We've had it,' he said.

'Like hell we have,' whispered Granger fiercely.

'I'm going back.'

'Not now!'

'I can say I've been for a walk.'

'Don't be a fool.'

'We'll never make it now,' said Morris.

'Shut up and follow me.'

'No,' said Morris.

They heard footsteps start across the inn yard, then stop. Car lights switched on and pierced the hedge a few yards away between them and the inn.

'Quickly!' said Granger, but Morris froze against the hedge. Granger stood still a moment longer then turned as the car engine started. He began to run along the edge of the field away from the inn. The beam of light chased and caught and held him. A voice shouted:

'There he is.' He could think only of running. He found himself in the corner of a field with impassable hedges lit by the car headlights. He tried to get away from the trap but a voice barked out:

'Stand still or I shoot.' Granger halted. He saw three white-faced men with guns raised. He looked at the ground at his feet and felt tides of fatigue course through his limbs.

CHAPTER TEN

WILLI woke, blinked at the sun streaming through the windows, glanced at the clock and remembered his promise to his father. He dressed slowly. Now that the sun shone and people moved along the street outside, busy with their day-to-day tasks, he found it hard to believe that he might lose Gerda. He folded back the bed-clothes and climbed down the narrow stairs into the kitchen. His clean white shirt was folded carefully over the rack.

'Good morning,' said Grandma, implying that the best of the morning had already passed, hours earlier.

'What's for breakfast?' he asked.

'It's in the oven—has been since seven.' Willi turned up his nose.

'Burnt offering,' he said. 'Dry as old sticks.'

'What did you say?' she called out over the noise of running water.

'Is this the best you could do?' She turned round, her hands covered with soapsuds.

'I can't be cooking all day.'

'I'll make do,' he said. 'I want to see father before midday.'

'He looked ill this morning,' she said. 'Can't understand it at his age.'

'Can't all be good like you,' said Willi, and chewed the hard fried bread and dried-up egg. He rubbed a crust into the bacon fat, drank a pint of milk and stood up. 'What's for dinner?' he asked.

'Shepherd's pie.'

'I'll have mine at the inn.' He walked over to the slopstone, brushed his lips across her cheek and went out.

He cycled slowly down the dusty street to the brick-built Town Hall at the corner of the square, propped his bicycle precariously against the low kerb and walked through a side entrance to his father's office. He knocked on the glass-panelled door. There was no reply. He knocked again, then entered. He ran to his father's side and tried to raise his head from the desk.

'Leave me a minute, Willi,' said Rummel. 'Just leave me alone.' Willi looked round for a glass of water. His father slowly straightened up.

'Here, drink this,' said Willi and held the glass to his father's lips. Rummel sipped a little, then leant back. 'I was sitting in the chair,' he said, 'not moving, not even thinking.' He breathed slowly and with conscious effort. His face was grey and the dark shadows under his eyes looked like death.

'It was as if a huge hand gripped me by the chest and squeezed.' He looked at Willi and Willi could see pain in his father's eyes.

'We'll get a doctor,' he said.

'No, not yet, just wait a minute.' Rummel fingered his left arm, from his shoulder down to the wrist.

'What's wrong with your arm?' Willi asked.

'Nothing,' he answered, and slowly flexed and unflexed his fingers. He took the glass from Willi and sipped half the water.

'Willi,' he said. 'I don't think I'm going to last much longer.' Willi moved towards the door.

'No, don't bring the doctor yet. I'd like to go home,' he said. 'I feel very tired. Perhaps if I rest awhile . . .'

'You've been working too hard,' said Willi. Rummel pressed a button. 'I'll get the car,' he said.

'You must see Grundel to-night,' said Rummel. Willi turned round as the door opened.

'Bring the car round to the side entrance, Fritz,' he said.

'Are you all right, Comrade?' asked Fritz.

'He's been working too hard,' said Willi. Fritz controlled his concern and hurried out. A few moments later they heard the car drive round a corner and halt under the window.

'Take it easy,' said Willi, and held out a hand.

'I can manage now,' said Rummel, his arms taking as much weight as his legs. 'That's better,' he said. Willi stood close by, his hands near his father's elbow. Rummel walked slowly, watching the floor a few steps ahead. 'We mustn't let anyone know,' he said.

Fritz opened the car door, helped Rummel inside, then turned to Willi: 'I have seen this come,' he said. 'Have you sent for the doctor?'

'Go and bring him,' said Willi, then drove his father home.

As the car stopped Rummel said: 'I've been happy in this house.' Willi opened the near-side door, opened the gate and took his father's arm. 'There's a good crop on the apple tree,' said Rummel. Willi tightened his lips and opened the scullery door. Grandma was eating a meat sandwich. She looked up, surprised by their early return, then she saw Rummel.

'He's had a bad turn,' said Willi. 'Go and fix his bed.'

Rummel looked through the window at the ripening fruit on the tree, at the bright sky beyond. 'I remember planting that,' he said.

Willi saw his father up the stairs, took the car back to the Town Hall and picked up his bicycle. He rode over the bridge and up the long hill towards the inn. The sun burnt down from a clear blue sky. Midges danced in small clouds under the willows. Willi bent his head over the handlebars and pushed hard on the pedals. The sweat streamed down his forehead, over his tight lips and clenched jaw.

Kurt shaved, washed and found his way down to the kitchen. Gerda was busy preparing lunch. Kurt glanced casually to see if they were alone.

'Good morning,' he said.

'Good morning,' she replied, not looking up from the enamel bowl into which she was shredding a cabbage.

'Did the noise disturb you last night?' he asked.

'No,' she replied.

'You seem to have lost two of your guests.'

'Do we?'

'They were arrested last night.' She continued to slice the cabbage. He walked alongside her and watched the knife cutting through the green leaves.

'I've thought a lot about last night . . .' he said. Out of the corner of her eye she could see his hand near her elbow. She picked up the bowl, carried it to the tap and turned on the cold water.

'About last night . . . I'm sorry.'

'Are you?' she asked, and laughed a short hard laugh. She looked at him for the first time. She held her chin up, her shoulders back and one eyebrow was raised. She saw two lines appear over the bridge of his nose. He walked up and took hold of her elbows.

'I'm very sorry.' She shook her arms free.

'Don't you believe me?' he asked. She looked him full in the eye.

'Why don't you go back to Mainfurt?' she said. Kurt felt the anger surge again.

'Do you mind giving me my breakfast,' he said. He walked out of the kitchen into the small, clean dining-room next to the bar, and looked through the windows which commanded a view of the slope down to the village. In the distance he saw a cyclist toiling up the hill.

Willi threw his bicycle against the iron drainpipe in the cobbled yard and watched Gerda through the open kitchen window. She was wearing the dress. She looked up, then without thinking, momentarily avoided his eyes before calling out:

'Hello, Willi!' He stood in the doorway and watched her carry a tray to the door. 'I'll be with you in a minute. Herr Schmidt wants his breakfast.' She returned quickly.

'Gerda,' he said, 'my father's had a bad attack.'

She said: 'Willi!' and thought about her own father.

'Gerda,' he said. 'Gerda, will you marry me, now, while there's still time?' She hesitated, wanting, but unable to say 'Yes.' Not wanting to hurt Willi, yet not able to forget her father.

'Must we go through it all again?' she asked.

'Isn't Kurt Schmidt going to set your father free?' Gerda walked away. A grasshopper sawed out a hot dry song from the back lawn. Through the window they could hear, then see, a skylark floating down, wings outstretched, preparing for the final swoop to earth. The air was hot and dry as if it had just been through a furnace. If only she could make him understand.

'Was this dress the only reason you crossed the line yesterday?' she asked, flaring out the full skirt with her right hand.

'One of them.'

'What were the others?' He looked at the rounded tops of the far hills, green against the blue sky.

'Why did you do it?' He shrugged his shoulders, but made no attempt to explain.

'It was something bigger than you, something you had to do,' she urged. 'You did it because you had to, because it was right. And that's the way I am. I love you, Willi, but I can't think of myself, yet.'

'There's nothing else on your mind?' She frowned and looked over the fields.

'We've known each other a long time, Gerda. Do a few words whispered in your ear count for more than you've learnt from your own experience?'

Gerda looked down at Willi. She knew there was no need to fight or scheme for his love. It would always be there. She wished that she could make him happy, and the wish grew strong. She looked at his good eye. If only she could cut herself free, but the bond could not be cut; since birth, and before, it had been there, intangible yet still unbreakable. She put her hands on Willi's shoulders and increased the pressure of her fingers. If only she could tear out the inborn roots and say she'd live only for him. But she could not desert her father.

Willi dropped his arms limply to his side. The future seemed barren. If only this moment, this hour, was a lifetime. If only he could forget, forget the problems at home and at Mainfurt.

Oh, God,' he murmured. 'Why has it to be like this? Why can't we be left alone?' Gerda made no effort to disengage her arms when he caught hold of them. She had always trusted Willi. Her love was strengthened by pity and sorrow. She sensed his mood and his need for the comfort she could give.

'Can't you feel the forces building up around us, hostile, threatening forces?' he asked. He shook his head helplessly and looked through the window. She saw faint lines wrinkle at the corners of his eyes. He turned away, but not before she'd seen the look of despair. She stared through the window at the foot-path along the hedgerow leading away from the road, at the ground sloping steeply towards the village, at the grass, cool in the shade from a giant beech. Two miles away the river flowed slowly; between green banks and gently around the village. The church spire, shining silver in the sun, rose high above the red-roofed cottages and houses, higher even than the grey slate of the Town Hall. They'd spent many hours in the shade of that giant beech. They'd watched the river from that tree, sheltering sometimes from the driving rain, sometimes from the sun.

If only he'd not been content to wait for her to grow older. If only he'd not wasted his opportunities. There might be no next time, no one to enjoy the leaves falling, see the grass grow shorter and change to dark winter green.

'I thought you wanted to talk to me?' she asked.

Willi looked at the line of her hair, her smooth forehead, her long outcurling eyelashes and the light of the sky in her eyes. He touched her cheeks gently with the tips of his fingers.

'You're all I need,' he said.

'Willi'—he felt her hand cover his and when he turned to look saw in her eyes thoughts too powerful to need words, too powerful for the promptings of reason and conscience. His head sank towards her. As she closed her eyes he brushed her cheeks and eyelids with his lips and breathed in the fragrance of her hair. He felt her smooth arm at the nape of his neck and the pressure pulling his lips to hers. He heard the chimes of the church bells faintly against the wind and tried to forget that this too would pass. Gerda's mind was filled with the beauty of her willingness. All the tenderness, all the love, all the passion long constrained surged at the touch of his lips and shocked and jolted her previous

conceptions. At that moment, her father, Farice, and everyone but Willi ceased to exist. As their lips separated her breath moaned softly from her throat.

'Gerda,' he whispered, and remembered with anguish the forebodings that waited off-stage. He stood with his cheek close to hers.

'Pray God I can convince you,' he said. 'I have dreamed my dreams of marriage, of a home.' He felt her cheek move away and saw two teardrops seep between her closed lashes. He smoothed the furrows on her forehead. 'Think beyond the past, think of a lifetime, think of yourself as a mother, with sons of your own. Don't be blinded by a vision of childhood. You can't be a daughter always. You must escape and lead your own life.'

'Don't, Willi. Don't talk like that.' She opened her tear-filled eyes. She must tell him that all their dear, wonderful dreams were impossible. She tightened her arm round his neck and drew his head to her breast and stroked his rough fair hair. But a stern voice forbade freedom while her father was in prison.

'If only it was something I could put my hands on,' he said.

'I can't help myself.'

'It's as if a fiend were riding you.'

'Is loying my father wrong?'

'No.' He shook his head.

'Then what is?'

'Perhaps the way I love you.'

'I love you too. Every time I see the despair rise in your eyes I feel miserable. Yet what can I do?'

'Did your father know the effect his arrest would have on your life?'

'He knew I loved him.'

'Yet he still carried on?'

'I still have a duty to him.'

'True duty springs from love. Everything else has been planted by people who have interests to protect.'

'My father had no interests.'

'Your father knew he risked arrest, knew you would be unhappy, yet he persisted. Doesn't that set you free?'

'It should if reason alone decided.'

'You'll not change your mind?'

'I can't,' she said. He kissed her tenderly.

'You fill my world.'

'And you follow me, satisfied with . . .' She shivered as a cool wind swept down from the hilltop through the window.

'Where do we go from here?'

'Wolff promised to engineer father's escape.'

'For nothing?'

'Wolff said I must help Farice, as Father did before me.'

He shook his head.

'Would you forsake your father for me?' she asked.

Willi looked her straight in the eye.

'If you were my wife, you would come first.'

'Wait a little longer,' she said.

'Oh, you bloody little fool!' said Willi, then shook his head.

He collected his bicycle and free-wheeled down the hill. Gerda walked into the dining-room. Kurt Schmidt turned from the window and faced her.

'Before I leave, I'll make you this promise,' he said. 'You want to save your father. If you give evidence that Willi crossed the frontier yesterday, I'll see your father is released.' Gerda closed her eyes a moment and opened her lips slightly.

'No, no,' she whispered, and stared, horrified.

'You know I'm only asking for the truth.' Gerda stood swaying slightly from side to side as if two magnetic forces were trying to destroy her balance.

'You'll be summoned to appear as a witness.'

'No!' she said, both hands to her cheeks. 'I can't do that!'

'You want to help your father more than anything. I'm giving you the opportunity,' said Kurt.

'Get out,' she cried.

'Don't be a fool,' he said. 'This is your last chance. Two of your residents were arrested last night.'

'Get out!' she cried.

'You'll be called as a witness to-morrow,' he said, and turned his back on her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WILLI jumped off the Mainfurt bus, made smart evasive moves in the crowded People's Progressive Stores, then headed straight for his rendezvous with Thorp.

Thorp sat deep in an arm-chair with his heels hooked precariously on the table edge, a pipe drooping from his mouth, the upper lids drooping over his eyes, and his nose drooping too. He watched Willi close the door and step into the room.

'What's brought you, chum?' he asked. His voice was unexpectedly deep and rough from so small and wiry a man.

'Heard anything over the receiver?' Thorp nodded his head, still with his pipe in his mouth.

He asked: 'Just what did you tell them when you crossed the line yesterday?'

'Why?'

'They told me to hold everything and await further instructions.'

'Thank the Lord for that!' said Willi.

'What do you know about it?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

'I'm stupid. I know nothing. You tell me.'

'Fighting in the streets will get us nowhere.'

'Go on.'

'Isn't it obvious?'

'Depends why you fight.'

'People just want to live and be left alone.'

'Ho, ho, ho,' mocked Thorp. 'Just leave me alone!'

'These are real people we're dealing with,' said Willi.

'Some of these real people can't find what they want at home or at the club on the corner. They want power.'

'Let them do the fighting.'

'You told all this to our friend across the line?'

'Just about.'

'Maybe he thinks you're a bad risk—not worth backing.'

'I'm not in this to keep the torch burning on the statue of liberty.'

'We know that. At least, we're just beginning to realize it. But we're big enough to back our ideals.'

'Back ideals, or keep the wolf from the door?'

'Maybe the new instructions'll answer that for you.'

Willi stood up.

'Before you go,' said Thorp. 'You wouldn't have told our friend a story that suited your personal problems, would you?'

'The whole damn thing's personal to me,' said Willi.

'Willi,' Thorp said. 'I'd trust you all the way, as man to man. But some things are bigger than two individuals.'

Willi knuckled his good eye.

'Doesn't anybody believe that one little man is more important than all the policies, religions and ideas in the world?' he asked.

'That's over my head,' said Thorp, and closed the door after Willi.

Grundel heard the knock on his door and frowned. He looked sidelong from the corners of his eyes at the night outside and waited. The knocking was firm but not aggressive. He lowered the evening paper, folded it carefully and heaved himself out of the low chair. He walked into the darkened front room and peered through the net curtains at the caller on the pavement below the window. He saw a slim, fair-haired, straight-backed man with a black patch over his right eye. He recognized Rummel's son and breathed again. Willi watched the door open.

'Come in,' said Grundel, and led the way into his study.

Grundel had a wide, high forehead, bushy eyebrows, piercing eyes, a large nose, pear-shaped and pitted, and a wide generous mouth. He looked tough and kind and nobody's fool.

'When you didn't answer I thought you might be out,' said Willi.

'I was asleep,' said Grundel. 'I've been busy, very busy. Things are coming to a head.' He sat down and motioned Willi into the chair opposite.

'Father asked me to come,' said Willi, and after a pause, 'he's not well.'

Willi undid the buttons of his dull black raincoat. Grundel squared the folded newspaper with the edge of the table.

'What is it?'

'His heart, I think.'

'Bad?'

'He's in bed. The doctor says he needs complete rest. I want you to insist that he takes that advice. You're the only one he'll listen to.'

'What does your father say?' Willi eased the patch over his eye.

'He said you'd information. Perhaps that's what he's waiting for.' Grundel leant over the arm of his chair and opened a cupboard.

'Did your father mention the job I'm offering you?'

Willi nodded.

'Will you take it?'

'No.'

'Changes for the better come from inside,' said Grundel, 'and they don't happen overnight.'

'That's what my father said—but he didn't say why you were offering me this job.'

'Your father's an old friend.'

'Nothing else?'

'Old friends are the only ones I can trust.'

Grundel didn't press the subject any further. He took out two tumblers and a half-empty bottle of cognac.

'This is all I have in the house,' he said, and filled the glasses.

'Health,' he said. Willi nodded and drank.

'Your father must be at the meeting to-morrow.'

'It'll kill him.'

'It's a test case.'

'What the hell do I care about that?' snapped Willi.

Grundel looked up from his glass.

'How far are you in your father's confidence?'

Willi avoided Grundel's eye.

'He wants me to carry on with his life's work.'

'What do you know . . . ?' Willi looked straight at Grundel.

'As much as people will tell me,' he said. Grundel stared at Willi. He liked his directness but wondered how far it would succeed in the council chamber. He had every confidence in old Rummel, but his son was young and politically inexperienced.

'Has your father briefed you?'

'He told me to see you.' Grundel nodded. He drank more cognac.

'On the surface,' he said, 'the meeting is about the harvest . . . and the targets set by the Ministry.'

'I know that much.'

'Beradin hopes we'll accuse Schmidt.'

'I thought Schmidt and Beradin were as thick as thieves.'

Grundel shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'Schmidt is wavering.'

'So we drop the case,' said Willi, 'and hope he joins our side.'

'No,' said Grundel. 'Your father must prove Schmidt's tractors are the cause of the harvest failures. Then when he is really frightened—we open our arms to him.'

Willi leant forward and stared into Grundel's eyes as if he were trying to read his thoughts.

'Are you really a Liberal or are you using it as a guise to gain power, absolute power?' Grundel smiled tolerantly, his pear-like nose spreading wide over his face.

'Time alone will give you the answer,' he said. Willi frowned. Even if Grundel was honest in his intentions, even if he succeeded in overthrowing Beradin, was the rest of the Government, after years of subjugation to Herlich's will, capable of dispensing law and justice? Or was the underground's way of bloody counter-revolution, with the prospect of foreign intervention and war, the only answer?

'I must go,' said Willi.

'You know what to tell your father?' Willi did not answer. They shook hands at the front door.

'He must attend the meeting to-morrow,' said Grundel. Willi walked down the three steps to the pavement, turned up his raincoat collar and hurried along the street.

A half-hour after Willi had left, Grundel received another visitor.

'Sit down, General,' he said, and pointed his fingers towards a chair. 'I'm glad you could come.' The General preferred to stand.

'What salary does a Lieutenant-General receive nowadays?' asked Grundel. The General frowned.

'Nine to eleven thousand a month,' he replied.

'A soviet military expert, a lieutenant-colonel, receives 30,000,' said Grundel. 'My salary is 12,000. In the factories a

Russian specialist earns in one hour what one of our own earns in a day. We, of course, foot the bill.' The General's short-cropped head remained motionless. He stared impassively at Grundel.

'You have heard that Herlich is dead?' asked Grundel.

'He was a sick man.'

'He died this afternoon.'

'The news is not public.'

'No,' said Grundel. 'You lost a friend during the last purge, Colonel-General Slitz.'

'The Colonel-General was relieved of his Command.'

'How long have you been Commander-in-Chief?'

'Eleven months.'

'That is a long time.'

'Have you any news for me?' asked the General, his voice, despite iron control, grating from his throat.

'I am tired of purges,' said Grundel. 'I'm tired of subordinating our vital national interests to the Russians. I am tired of secret police.'

'The secret police are very powerful.'

'Herlich is dead. Beradin, without him, is a brick without straw.'

'A very large and important brick.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

'RELAX, dear,' said the midwife. 'Save your strength. Relax between the contractions.' She rubbed the flat at the base of Leila's spine. 'Relax, dear,' said the midwife, and wished she'd another pair of hands. The poor girl's nerves were taut and her body as stiff as a board, when it should have been supple and relaxed. She wondered where the father was. Thank the Lord they weren't all like this.

Leila moaned through her teeth. I hate him, she muttered. Curse him for doing this to me. She twisted her head from side to side in an effort to escape the pain and the degradation of his

broken promises. She tightened her eyelids until they hurt in an effort to erase the shame of her own stupidity in believing, in wanting to believe. It was coming again. She could feel the muscles bunching together, could feel the pains growing and shooting out sharp daggers. She muttered:

'Oh Kurt, why don't you come?'

She heard the nurse say: 'Relax, dear,' but the words had no meaning. She dug her fist into her back, tried to gouge out the pain with her knuckles. Then her hands ran over the mattress, seeking blindly something not there. They gripped the edge of the bed, the rail, the nurse's arm. She wanted to leave herself, to run away. She raised her hands and grasped the headboard and buried her face in the curve of her arm. The midwife put an arm round Leila's shoulders.

'You're not helping yourself,' she said. She saw the girl's eyelids relax, saw the lines on the grey flesh of her face become less deep. The eyes opened and stared at her from circles of dark shadows. The look they gave frightened the midwife. She'd seen eyes filled with pain and fear, but never eyes with such a look.

'Where is he?' asked Leila.

'Now, now,' the midwife heard herself say. She kept on talking, hoping her words would reassure them both. 'He'll not be long now. It won't be long now before you have a lovely baby—your own baby.' Leila closed her eyes. The falseness of the words stood out like blisters. She laughed a harsh, unearthly laugh.

'I hate him,' she whispered. 'God make him suffer like this. Just let him know pain.' Her limbs felt weak. She could feel the sweat cold on her body and legs. The contractions were speeding up. The time in between of peace lasted only for minutes. Alternating in her mind was hatred of Kurt for not being with her and a deep-felt need for his presence. As the need grew so the hatred grew. She heard a faint ringing on the front door and a hope surged immediately but died as quickly. Kurt would not ring. He had a key. But it might be a message. 'See who it is,' she said. 'Leave me and see who it is.'

A determined ring on the bell made up the midwife's mind. She turned to go. Leila seized her by the arm as the pain returned.

'No,' she cried, 'don't leave me just yet.' Her fingers dug into

the matronly arms of the midwife. She realized she was giving in to her fear, but could do nothing about it. The dread of being left alone in pain was too much.

'It might be your husband,' suggested the midwife, 'or a message from him.'

The words sank slowly through the haze clouding Leila's judgment and as the pain receded she nodded and said: 'See who it is, but don't leave me long.' The midwife saw a tall fair-haired man with a black patch over his right eye.

'Are you the husband?' she asked. Willi frowned.

'I want to speak to Kurt Schmidt's wife.'

'Are you from her husband?'

'No. . . .'

'Listen,' whispered the midwife. 'His wife is very poorly—she's in the wrong mental state, her husband must be a swine, but she still loves him. You must tell her that he sends his love. You see, I don't think she wants to live.' Willi frowned. He'd not expected to walk into this. The midwife seeing his hesitancy took him by the arm and closed the door behind him.

'You might save a life,' she said.

'Bring him in,' called Leila. Her voice sounded constrained as if by a hand at her throat.

'Follow me,' said the midwife, and ran on thick sturdy legs through the lounge into the bedroom.

Willi stood at the doorway, his face pale. The midwife whipped a sheet over Leila, but her struggles and writhing soon had it narrow and sodden across her belly.

'Has Kurt sent you?' asked Leila, her voice constricted by mental and physical anguish.

Willi's mind seemed a long way away from his voice. His reason, his own worries and fears were bludgeoned by the effect of the feverish movements of the woman on the blood-soaked bed, by the anguish in her shadow-ringed eyes and thin, drawn, pale lips. The suffering and torment in her voice cut through to the essence of his personality, and he answered haltingly: 'He sends all his love and begs your forgiveness.' Leila closed her eyes.

'Oh, Kurt,' she said. Then more pain racked her body.

'Get more water, hot water and towels,' said the midwife, wanting him out of the way. Willi turned away, his normal

brown complexion shot through with white. He found the bathroom, drank a tumblerful of cold water and washed his face. His legs felt weak as he withdrew an armful of towels from the airing cupboard. He hunted round the kitchen, found an enamel bucket, filled it with hot water, then returned, trying to keep his eyes from the woman on the bed.

'Put the towels down here,' said the midwife, and nodded her head at a chair, 'and the bucket on the floor!' she added. Willi obeyed as quickly as he could.

'If you're going to pass out, go in the other room,' said the nurse. Willi stood still and stared at Leila, bent double like a jack-knife, stared at the midwife kneeling down, her elbows resting on the bed, her practised fingers working gently. She reached for a towel.

Willi realized that he was contributing nothing to the midwife's struggle. There must be something he could do. At the foot of the bed wispy spirals of malodorous vapour rose from the pile of towels warm with blood and crimson slime. He held the bowl at arm's length and threw the contents into cold water. While they soaked he turned on the stove under the kettle. Slowly as his thoughts began to sort themselves out, he realized that the naked brutal impact of this childbirth had shattered his idyllic concept of love.

He returned to the midwife's side. Out in the countryside the rustling leaves and the bushy grass spread a fine curtain between the act and its consequences, protecting the dream from the unbelievable functions.

He picked up the last clean towel and with the gentleness of a caress wiped her brow and the sides of her nose. She raised her eyes to his. His hand rested on her cheek for a moment, then her lids slid down, her features relaxed, the lines of fatigue melted away, and she breathed gently and evenly.

The nurse waited for the last surge of blood to be pumped along the cord, put on the clips, cut, made the knot and bound the wound. The child was severed from its mother. She wrapped it in a blanket and placed it carefully alongside Leila.

'Here's your baby son,' she said. Leila opened her eyes and with a slight movement of wonder felt the delicate, perfectly

formed fingers of one small hand. Willi watched the transfiguration. With sacred humility he was aware that out of the filth had emerged a moment of pure beauty and love.

The midwife raised the cup of hot sweet coffee to her lips and looked over the rim across the lounge and through the open door to the sleeping form of Leila.

'Do you know her husband?' she asked. Willi nodded. 'Tell him to be kind to her, tell him if necessary to pretend, even if it's only for a few days.'

'Do you know who he is?' asked Willi.

'No,' she said.

'How do you know what he's like then?'

'I heard her talking . . . I suffered with her, her fear and no one to think about, no one's love to rely on.'

'Poor woman. . . '

'If you've any influence make him care for her, even if it's only pretence. She needs someone.' She looked at the clock. 'I must go, I've other cases.'

'Is she very ill?' asked Willi.

'Not in her body.'

'Wouldn't she be better off without him?'

'You saw the way she relaxed when you delivered your message. She still loves him. He's the father.' She shook her head at the stupidity.

'That's life,' she said, and tried to clear her mind in readiness for the next call.

'What happens now?' asked Willi. 'Will she be left alone?'

'I just deliver the child,' said the midwife. The telephone rang.

'It'll be for me,' she said. She picked up the receiver, listened and nodded her head. 'I'm on my way now. Yes, I have the address.'

'Won't anyone else call?' he asked.

'I can't be in two places at once. I just deliver the child.'

'But in emergencies?'

'This isn't an emergency any more. The child's born. Now I'm going to one that's about to be born.' She dressed herself, collected her black bag and walked to the door.

'Can't you do anything?' she asked and closed the door.

Willi swore to himself. This was the real struggle—the struggle for life against the outer darkness, and men squandered their vital energies killing each other.

He closed the door gently on Leila and walked back to the telephone. He lifted the receiver, and asked the operator for the City Maternity Hospital, the local party headquarters, the young Octobrists, but the best offer he received was help for the following day, so he telephoned Grandmother and told her he'd not be home for the night—and rang off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRANGER raised his arms level with his head and watched the three men approach. They prodded him towards the black saloon car. As they drove past the inn he saw Morris talking to Schmidt. He thought about wild ducks swimming after mongrel dogs and being trapped.

They drove him swiftly through the village of Heisenach along the main road to the slum area of Mainfurt and halted outside a solid iron gate set in a high brick wall. Not one word did they speak, either among themselves or to their prisoner.

They walked him into the guardroom through a small side door, then searched him. They took away his wrist watch, wallet, identity card and other papers. The officer in charge of the guardroom pointed to Granger's wedding ring and motioned him to take it off. Granger looked at the odds, ten to one against.

'No,' he said. The officer signalled two men to move forward. Granger caught one flush on the nose before he was struck unconscious from behind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHERE are my clothes?' asked Rummel. Grandma straightened and stopped panting.

'What?' she said.

'My clothes, where are they?'

'No!' she said. 'You're not thinking of getting up.'

'Will you fetch them or do I have to crawl out of bed myself?'

'Wait till Willi comes home,' she said, her voice slow and wheedling, 'he knows where they are, he put them away.'

'Look,' said Rummel, realizing he was wasting his precious strength arguing, 'I must go to the meeting.' He pulled at the bed-clothes but they slid through his weak fingers. He raised his knees and slowly prised free the part tucked under the mattress. He turned over on his side and withdrew first one leg, then the other, and lowered both over the edge until they touched the cool floor. He sat upright and propped his body with his arms, looking through the window, waiting, hoping that the dizziness would settle.

Grandma watched all this, her hands clenched into her bosom.

'No,' she said. 'No,' her voice betraying both her fears and her helplessness.

'Open the wardrobe and help me on with my clothes,' he said.

'Where's Willi?' she moaned. 'Why doesn't he come home?'

Rummel made as if to stand up. Grandma held up her hand, palm towards him.

'All right,' she said. 'Just wait and I'll fetch them.'

Perhaps Willi might still come back in time. She shook her head and turned from Rummel. Once he'd done as he was told. Once he'd realized his mother knew best, but now he was an old man and she was an even older woman. She looked at his suit and held it in her horny hands awhile. When she turned she was blinking her eyes.

Rummel's shoulders relaxed as he saw her open the solid wardrobe. Why couldn't she have done that in the first place? Would she never realize that the cord had rotted away, that he was a man with duties to the outside world?

She carried his suit and shirt to the bed and unbuttoned his pyjamas. Her touch was unsure and her fingers fumbled. He

looked at her face then down at his hands and wiped the cold sweat on to the counterpane. He sat quietly and allowed her to undress him and help him on with his shirt and underpants and suit, but avoided looking into her face. He slipped his feet into his shoes. As she tied his laces he frowned and said:

'It's a long time since you've done this for me.'

'For you and for Willi,' she said, 'both.'

'Now get Fritz to bring round the car. I'll wait here.'

Fritz helped Rummel out of the car, up the steps, along the corridor, to the committee room. Hermann met him at the door.

'What the confounding hell are you doing here?' he asked.

'Willi's not turned up,' said Rummel, still leaning on Fritz's arm. Grundel, Beradin and Schmidt, sitting round a large shiny-topped oval table, turned on their seats and watched his entrance. Hermann on one side and Fritz on the other manoeuvred him into a chair, then Fritz, hating to leave Rummel even with Hermann, backed out of the room and closed the door from the outside.

For a moment no one spoke, then Grundel tapped the chairman's hammer on the wooden block and said mildly: 'I shall ask Comrade Rummel to speak first.' Schmidt glanced at Beradin. The two shorthand-typists from the secretariat felt for their pads but still looked at the five men arranged round the table.

'Don't bother to stand,' said Grundel.

Rummel tried to clear his throat, then, with a loos impediment still roughening his voice, said bluntly: 'We all know why we are here. The reason is simple. Politics don't mix with agriculture.' He took a sip from a glass of water and cleared his throat again, this time successfully. He continued:

'The targets we were given were political targets, not . . .'

Schmidt jumped to his feet.

'That's a lie!' he said. Grundel raised an eyebrow, then lifted the hammer. Beradin pulled Schmidt back into his seat. Schmidt smiled nervously with one side of his face. He watched Rummel's thumbs hooked into a waistcoat pocket, the knuckles screwing into his ribs. Rummel waited a moment then continued:

'We are the victims of one man's political ambition.'

Schmidt jumped up again.

'I hope this man's fancies will be supported by facts,' he said. Rummel made no attempt to argue. He sat quietly waiting for silence. He knew what he had to say and knew also how small was his reserve of energy. When all was quiet he spoke again.

'Economic decisions have been controlled by political considerations. To impress the declining intelligence that was until recently our master . . .'

Beradin thumped the table.

'This is going too far,' he said. Grundel shocked everyone by banging the hammer on the table.

Rummel continued: 'To impress and to gain promotion quickly, Comrade Schmidt proposed a production scheme that would more than double the number of tractors available to the collective farms. The considerations governing this scheme had nothing to do with agriculture. They were political. They looked good on paper and would impress the ignorant—until such time as rations were cut.'

'Do you know what you're saying?' asked Schmidt, his voice higher-pitched than normal.

'I advise you to save your questions until Comrade Rummel has finished his address,' Grundel said.

'If the Comrade cannot answer questions he should not make these vile accusations,' said Beradin. Rummel closed his eyes a moment and lowered his head. He felt very weak. His efforts of will were harder and harder to make and achieved less. No one could help him. He opened his eyes. If only he could tap the source of life for one hour, then he'd tear up these questions.

'Are you able to carry on?' asked Grundel. Rummel nodded.

'A year ago, ten tractors were delivered to the Number One Area Station. No choice was given, no say in determining the specifications. They were just dumped in the yard.'

'Would you rather have had no tractors?'

Rummel answered without pause: 'The choice was not between ten tractors and no tractors, but between having four that could work on this heavy soil and having ten that would look impressive on paper.'

'They worked elsewhere.'

'The soil is lighter elsewhere. Here we have to plough deep

to maximize our output. That is one reason why we shall not reach the target.'

'We'll see about that!' said Schmidt, and looked round the other faces. The clock in the belfry down the street struck the half-hour.

Rummel realized he felt less weak. He waited for the old church clock, then said: 'There are other causes. To make a small saving in transport an order was issued last year instructing all farms to retain seed potatoes from their own crops for replanting this year. Previously we have imported our seed potatoes from areas with different soil—the change of environment produced a healthier crop.' Schmidt laughed loudly. Rummel ignored the interruption. 'The result has been a natural weakness in the plants and a drop in yield which our unscientific forefathers knew would happen, through generations of trial and error.' Rummel paused, not through weakness but with surprise that he now felt stronger. 'Those are two of the reasons. Hermann here will put forward others. If, however, this meeting is in reality seeking a scapegoat,' he pointed a long finger at Schmidt, 'then the man they want is sitting there. But,' he added, 'I want no scapegoats. A man learns by his mistakes. I want only to improve output.' As Rummel finished Beradin turned to Schmidt and whispered in his ear:

'Don't believe him. Your only chance now is to prove sabotage.'

The two typists glanced quickly at each other and back to the five silent men round the table.

Grundel touched the handle of the hammer.

'Comrade Schmidt!' Schmidt straightened his back. He spoke slowly. His voice trembled in a low key.

'The decisions relating to tractors and seed potatoes were not exactly my own. Indeed,' he said, 'I suggest the only reason they are now being questioned is because Herlich is on his deathbed.'

'You are the Member most concerned,' suggested Rummel.

'Come off it,' said Hermann, 'you gave the orders.'

'And the Politburo agreed!' retorted Schmidt.

Grundel intervened:

'Let's not stray from the point,' he said. Schmidt glanced sideways at Beradin.

'Comrade Rummel,' he said, 'would make believe that political decisions caused the predicted shortages. I agree. I would go even further and call it sabotage,' Schmidt continued. 'I can produce facts.' He looked at Rummel, bent forward, then whispered: 'Where was your son all day yesterday?'

'What has that to do with agriculture?' asked Rummel calmly.

'Your son was across the frontier plotting with our enemies.'

'Can you prove that?' asked Grundel, his brows low over his eyes.

'I have witnesses.'

'Who?' asked Grundel.

'Seidler.'

'Seidler!' snorted Hermann. 'He's your man. He'd say anything.'

'He's not the only witness.'

'Can you produce these witnesses?' asked Grundel.

'They're in the ante-room.' Grundel turned to the typists and said: 'Bring in Seidler.' Seidler, as bold as brass, followed the secretary. He looked Grundel straight in the eye. Kurt thought, perhaps he can pull it off. Without warning Grundel asked: 'You know what you have to say?'

'About what, Comrade?'

'About Willi Rummel.'

'What I saw, will that do?' Beradin smiled and closed his eyes slowly while nodding to Schmidt.

'Tell us what happened,' said Beradin. Seidler looked at the ceiling in the corner of the room beyond the table.

'As a militant member of the party, in these troubled times, it is my duty to . . .'

'Aye, we know all that,' said Hermann, 'just get on with the evidence.'

'It is my duty,' continued Seidler, 'to watch out for enemies of the State. For a long time I have suspected that Willi Rummel's rabbit-catching has cloaked more sinister activities. So I followed him. The day before yesterday I saw him cross the frontier.'

'This story,' growled Hermann, 'is ridiculing a serious political and economic problem. Are we to decide problems of State on a schoolboy level?'

'You saw him cross the frontier?' asked Beradin.

'Yes.'

'What has all this to do with agriculture?' asked Rummel.

'Sabotage,' Beradin said, 'is important in itself.'

Hermann pushed his chair back.

'Let me ask him a few questions.' He turned slowly towards Seidler. 'How long have you been, I'll not say *working*, how long have you been *on* the farm?'

'Three years, just over, Comrade.'

'You can drop the "Comrade" business,' said Hermann, 'that doesn't fool anybody. Now when did you follow Willi?'

'The day before yesterday.'

'Was that the day you were told to take the tractor down to the five-acre field?' Seidler looked straight at Hermann.

'Yes,' he said, 'but I followed Willi before working hours, just after dawn.' Hermann snorted.

'There are no set working hours on a farm,' he said. 'As soon as it's light you should be on the job, but watching somebody catch rabbits is easier than working.'

'He was crossing the frontier.'

'That's your excuse for being on the job late.'

'It's the truth, I swear.'

'You'd swear anything,' said Hermann.

'It's the truth.'

'How many times a week are you pulled up for skimping the job?' asked Hermann.

'They've got a down on me!'

'Is that why none of our good workers will follow you on a job?' Seidler shrugged his shoulders.

'You're no good,' said Hermann. 'You've never done a day's work in your life. And now you've found a racket, an easy living, accusing others of sabotage.' Hermann looked straight at Beradin. 'If our anti-sabotage experts'd take off their coats and roll up their sleeves, we'd not be in this mess now.'

'How do you know it was my son?' asked Rummel.

'I saw him.'

'How close did you get without him seeing you?' Seidler pulled his jacket down at the back.

'About four hundred yards.'

'He'd smell you that far off,' said Hermann.

'And you recognized him at that distance?' asked Grundel.

Seidler said, 'Yes,' defiantly. Grundel banged the hammer.

'Go back into the waiting-room. We'll see the next witness.'

As Seidler walked out, Kurt Schmidt looked at the table top. This is ridiculous, he thought. It's unreal. No one's really interested in why the crops have failed. They're just positioning themselves to seize power when Herlich dies.

Gerda sat on the hard wooden bench in the waiting-room and stared unseeingly at the angular highlights and the vague shadows on the polished block floor. She had to make the choice. In a few minutes she had to climb down from the high wall. Her eyes were blank with apathy. Not a single thought other than the dull realization of the impossibility of making any decision occupied her mind. She shook her head, slowly raised her hand to her pale face and squeezed her temples. The door opened and Seidler walked out jauntily, shaking the water off his feathers, believing that quick excuses had turned defeat into victory. Gerda stood up and followed the beckoning attendant.

Schmidt looked up as Gerda entered.

'Do you know why you're here?' asked Grundel. Gerda nodded her head. Beradin glanced quickly at Schmidt, his eyes dark with suspicions. Grundel said:

'Comrade Schmidt says that Willi Rummel is a spy. He says you told him so.' Gerda looked at Grundel, but made no answer.

'Is Willi Rummel a spy?' he asked again. She took a very deep halting breath as if her lungs had been fighting for oxygen against a stoppage in her throat.

'No, no, no,' she said. Beradin turned to Schmidt.

'Oh!' said Grundel and looked with slowly widening eyes at Schmidt, 'you hear what she says?'

'What did she tell you?' asked Beradin.

'That he had crossed the line,' said Schmidt.

'When did she tell you this news?' asked Beradin.

'At the inn, at the bar last night.'

'She wasn't in the bar last night,' said Hermann.

'Were you there all the time?' asked Beradin.

'It's better than scheming and conniving in a corner!' replied Hermann.

'But the dress,' said Schmidt, 'the dress he brought you from over the line? The one you're wearing now!'

'Willi's not a spy. I never said that,' she repeated.

'Are you Comrade Schmidt's mistress?' asked Hermann.

Kurt jumped up, but Grundel motioned him to sit down.

'We are friendly,' Rummel smiled.

'Aren't you friendly with Willi too?' Gerda nodded her head, her lips trembling.

'Have you quarrelled with Willi?' asked Rummel. Gerda shook her head. Hermann laughed.

'So that's sabotage!' he said. He turned to Schmidt: 'Is that the best you can rake up? A slacker and a girl who's quarrelled with her lover!'

'I think you can go,' said Grundel to Gerda. When she had left and the door was closed and both secretaries were seated, Grundel said:

'I think the charge of sabotage has fallen flat.'

Kurt tightened his fists. He looked round the table. All eyes were staring at him. Oh God, he thought, how did he get into this. It was a nightmare without the prospect of waking.

'I have something to say,' said Beradin, 'about sabotage. I too have men investigating this area. So far two arrests have been made. I expect more. What my men have found out supports Comrade Schmidt's accusation.'

'And if it doesn't,' said Hermann, 'you can soon manufacture something that does.' Beradin stared through his jet black eyes at Hermann. For Hermann to be so hostile meant that he had powerful support. Grundel hammered the table.

'Hermann,' he said.

Hermann cleared his throat and wiped his lips with a large, red-spotted handkerchief. He looked at Schmidt and Beradin.

'What Rummel here has just said is true—every word of it. And there's a lot he hasn't said. You're dealing with living things. You can't get the best out of either crops or labourers by forcing them. It's not in their nature. And nature is a damned sight better organizer than Schmidt.'

'This is all very pleasant,' said Beradin, 'but let's have facts.'

'There's more than facts in farming,' replied Hermann. 'You've got to feel—and that's something beyond you.'

Stark, naked hatred stared from Beradin's eyes, then something else, round the pupil, a little white fringe of fear. Grundel noticed it and would have liked to see the outcome of the clash. Hermann, big in body, honest, leant forward, his blunt strong jaw firm. But Grundel didn't want the showdown yet. So he said: 'You can go on believing the world is flat until someone sails round it. You can go on believing a political theory until practice proves it wrong. The time to change is before disaster. That time is now. Unfortunately a change would be a disaster for some people. It would mean loss of office. But not to change will be a disaster for many more. Our present theory helped and justified a great revolution, but now the theory's out of date, possibly because we pushed it too far.'

'We'll have to make changes all right,' said Hermann. 'You can transfer Beradin's army of snoopers to the farms. I'll see they do an honest day's work.'

'How will you see,' said Beradin, 'without snoopers of your own?'

'Incentives,' said Grundel, 'personal incentives, houses, high wages, consumer goods.'

'Incentives! And what of defence?'

'Who wants to defend a wilderness? However,' said Grundel, 'although these changes are necessary, we must make them gradually, with due thought for valuable past services.'

Then the telephone rang. Grundel lifted the receiver. He nodded, then said 'Thank you.'

'It's happened,' he said. 'He's dead.' Grundel pushed the telephone away.

'So Herlich's dead,' Rummel said, more to himself than to the others.

Beradin felt the shock all the way down his spine. How had the news leaked out? He forced himself to stare at Grundel.

'Who was that?' he asked:

'I should have told you,' said Grundel. 'We were uneasy about this scientist and his treatment so we sent representatives of the Committee of Surgeons to check on progress. They arrived too late.' Beradin felt as if the weight of the atmosphere would burst his ear drums. 'We'll have to adjourn,' he said, and stood up.

Schmidt looked up from the table. Adjourn! He still had a chance! Perhaps in the chaos of reorganization the enquiry would be postponed, indefinitely. 'I must return at once,' said Beradin. Then he walked to the door, wondering how Grundel would react.

Rummel felt a great tiredness sweep over his body. All that effort and now, adjourn!

'When do we sit again?' he asked, his voice weak. Beradin spoke from the doorway.

'I am summoning an immediate meeting of the Inner Politburo. I shall expect you,' he looked at Grundel and Hermann, 'and you,' looking at Schmidt, 'to be available if needed.' Grundel roused himself. 'Since no successor to Herlich has been named we will summon the Politburo jointly,' said Grundel.

'Aye,' said Hermann directly to Beradin, 'don't count your chickens before they're hatched!'

Beradin frowned as he walked down the silent corridor. After years of fawning subordinates, Hermann's bluntness came as a shock. Only Herlich had spoken to him like that. Men were only aggressive from strong positions; he could think of no other reason. Since Hermann had been aggressive it could only mean that his own position was no longer impregnable.

Schmidt stared at the empty doorway, then at Hermann. He picked up his briefcase and walked to the door. Then he turned. He wanted to say something that would link himself with their courage, with the stand he felt they were making against Beradin, but he was afraid. It would be a nail in his own coffin. At last he said:

'I don't want to be on his side. I hate the things he stands for,' and walked quickly away. Hermann blinked. 'You were right!' he said, and looked at Grundel, then at Rummel.

'Let's hope he doesn't change his mind,' said Grundel.

Schmidt drove slowly towards the city. In his isolation he could see that Leila alone wanted him for himself. While he had been the all-conquering hero striding up the pyramid to high office he had not needed her. She'd been valuable as a servant and a bedmate, and not even that in the last months of pregnancy. In adversity he'd discovered how much he needed her love, needed her as a person.

He drove along the north circular road and stopped outside the block of flats. He ran up the stairs, opened the door and had called out:

'Leila,' before he saw Willi.

'So you've come home,' said Willi.

'You!' he said. 'Where's Leila?'

'She's in bed.' Kurt stood by the door. 'She needs sleep. She delivered a baby boy last night while you were away.'

'A boy!' repeated Kurt softly. 'Is she all right?'

'She was dying, killing herself until I told her a lie.'

'A lie?'

'I told her you'd sent me—to tell her that you loved her. I told her just before the child was born. She believed me.' Kurt sat down slowly in a chair.

'Is she all right?'

'She's sleeping.'

'Why . . . why did you tell her that when you've every reason to hate me?'

'I don't rightly know. Just the look in her eyes. At first she thought it was you. . . .' Kurt watched Willi put on his coat.

'Is that why you came here?'

'I came to tell your wife about Gerda,' Kurt nodded.

'I tried to make Gerda testify against you,' he said.

'Make her?'

'I promised to free her father.'

'And she told everything. . . .'

'No,' said Kurt, 'she refused.'

'She wouldn't give me away?' asked Willi.

'You'd better be careful—Beradin was there. I tell you this because I want to repay you for what you've done.'

'Repay me!' said Willi, and turned away, 'with the news that Gerda loves me. My God, that's more than repayment for something I couldn't help doing. . . .'

'I must go,' he said. 'I must go now, at once. The sooner I leave the sooner I'll see her.'

Kurt watched him to the door then carefully and quietly went in to see Leila. She lay on her stomach with her head sideways. Her face through the paleness looked calm and peaceful. He

knelt down and kissed her on the forehead. She opened her eyes and recognized him with a gentle smile.

'I've been a fool,' he said, 'forgive me.' She lifted her hand and took hold of his and squeezed it gently. She blinked her eyes and smiled again like a child that has been reassured after a bad dream.

'Have you seen the baby?' she asked, and looked beyond him to the large easy chair serving as a cradle. Kurt looked down on the child, at the brown crinkled skin and sparse hair. A feeling of humble ownership, a slow realization of the dignity and stature and responsibility of being the father of this helpless, sleeping child, started to peel off the bindings that encased his soul. Now he knew why Hermann could stand up to Beradin. Hermann knew he was valuable in his own right. That even without the State, without the trappings of office, without the power to sign the death warrant he was important as an individual. He looked back to Leila.

'It's a great responsibility,' he said. She nodded her head.

'It's a little frightening,' she said. Kurt stroked her forehead. No purpose would be served by unburdening his worries on her. He'd have to face up to them himself.

'What's going to happen?' she asked.

'We're beginning a new era,' he said. 'From now on there's no need to worry. All you have to think about is yourself and our baby.'

'Are you staying with me? Can you get the time off?'

'For a while. But I'll not leave you alone. I'll arrange for a nurse.' Leila remembered the past, his unconscious brutality. She gripped his hand.

'We are falling in love all over again, aren't we?' she said. He nodded his head and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, afraid at first that any words would rekindle the past.

'Talk to me,' she said, 'tell me what's worrying you.'

'I'm not worried,' he said, 'now I've made the decision, now we've found each other, I don't want to tire you with long explanations.'

'It won't tire me. I'll sleep better after I know. You see, I knew you were being torn by conflicting loyalties, but there was nothing I could do to help.'

'I wouldn't let you help. You were right when you said I had changed. The system had got hold of me. I was thinking only of work and promotion. The job had become an end in itself. Although I told myself the reason I had to go on and on, climbing higher, working harder, was for you, for us, I didn't realize that the means I had adopted were destroying the end. I was trapped. The system was wrapping a cocoon around my personality. Only in these last twenty-four hours have I realized that the uniform of the official had turned into a strait-jacket. I had no life as an individual human being, as a husband, as anything but an official. All I had, you, my wife whom I love dearly, this flat, our home, the car, our livelihood, all depended on the State, and not so much on the State as on the will of one man. An intrigue in which I had no part could take all this away. I had no retreat, no place even in your heart where I could retire when beaten, for they could separate us if they wanted. Now things are changing. Herlich is dead. We have the opportunity of changing the system. I am not alone in this, there are others, and we are strong. That is why I say we are starting a new era.' Leila patted his hand.

'And you love me again,' she said. 'And I love you more than anything in the world. You and our son.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRANGER stood handcuffed to two guards. 'Who helped you across the line?' No answer.

'We know it was Willi Rummel.' No answer.

'Why don't you admit the truth?' No answer.

'You know what happens to spies?' Silence.

'You still say you are from the brewery?' Silence.

'Answer me!' Silence.

'Do you know who we are?'

'Bastards.' Thump! Granger slumped forward.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WILLI felt the throb of fatigue in his legs as he walked along the echoing street towards the meeting place. Fatigue rounded his shoulders until the thought of Gerda straightened his back and raised his head. He was aware of her captivating his mind's eye, not as a photograph but as both the cause and the effect of his love. He quickened his pace, turned a corner and knocked on a door. The young padre, Farice, opened it and stood aside as Willi entered.

'The others here?'

'Not yet. You're the first.' Farice stood in the lobby with his back to the closed door.

'They've made another arrest,' said Farice. 'They caught the Englishman, Granger.'

'No!' said Willi.

'They're close on our heels,' said Farice, 'we've not much time. Have the West promised us help?' he asked.

Willi nodded.

'When are they sending the weapons?' Farice asked. His brown eyes glowed from the shadows with a light that was harsh and yet luminous. Willi wondered again why Farice had become a priest, wondered why he had remained behind. The old one, Sammer, was tied to the parish by age and loving devotion, but not Farice. Farice was young and forceful, could have turned his hand to anything. There was no need for him to stay.

'When?' asked Farice again.

'I was given more than a date and place,' said Willi. 'I was given responsibility, responsibility for men's lives. There will be no date until I decide.'

'Until you decide?' asked Farice.

Willi walked along the narrow hallway into the room and sat down on a cheap wooden chair at the trestle table.

'We'll see what the others say.'

'You and I must decide before the others arrive.'

'You want everything cut and dried.'

'We know what is right.'

'I wish we did.' Farice sat down opposite Willi.

He leant forward as he spoke: 'The whole world is waiting

for the sign. We must give that sign.' Willi blinked his eyes slowly.

'We need more than a sign,' he said. 'We need a chance of success, a chance of living after the smoke has cleared from the streets, a chance of returning to our loved ones.' Farice stood up, tall and slender. His lips were curved with disdain and his nostrils flared with passion.

'Self, self, self,' he said angrily. 'Can't you understand that millions upon millions of people have their eyes upon us? We're not fighting for the lives of a few parishioners, but for the souls of the world. We ought to rejoice that we have opportunity, that we are chosen for the task.'

'You think about the millions . . . my poor brain is too small. I can only think about a few, the people I know.' Farice swept the chair out of his way and strode to the empty fireplace and stood with his heels on the kerb.

'Are you going to allow sentiment to sway the destiny of millions who are powerless to do anything for themselves, who look to us to act for them?'

'I don't know,' said Willi. 'I want to hear what the others say.'

'Why had they to trust you with the information?' asked Farice.

'And the responsibility,' said Willi, 'don't forget that. Yet they know me, the way I feel, the way I think. They told me I was reliable and level-headed.'

Farice snorted.

'This is no time for counting halfpennies and pennies. We must be able to see the vision of the future.'

'We must face facts,' said Willi.

'And turn our backs upon our friends? Do we desert Gerda's father and this Englishman, Granger?'

They both turned their heads towards the door as someone knocked. Farice strode down the corridor and a moment later led Muller, the leader of the factory workers, back into the room.

* 'He's backing out,' said Farice.

'Who is?' asked Muller.

'Since when has caution been backing out?' asked Willi.

'Caution?' asked Muller.

'He wants a holy war,' said Willi; Muller sat down heavily at the trestle table. The humour lines around his eyes were stretched with seriousness.

'You can talk about deciding this or that, but I live with them. I don't think we shall be able to decide anything,' he said. 'A spark and they'll be out in revolt, out in the streets, insane with anger.'

'What did I tell you?' said Farice. 'The hour has struck.'

'Let's forget about the hour striking,' said Willi, 'and about the evil that's upon us. I'm not even sure that we want to overthrow the Government.'

'What did I tell you!' said Farice, staring more horrified than triumphant at Muller. 'He doesn't want to overthrow the Government!'

'Listen,' said Muller, 'no amount of talking by us will put food in the mouths of hungry children. The workers have been oppressed and ground down to explosion point. I used to hear sullen murmurings. Now everything is quiet, the quiet of desperation. They're dangerously close to the point where death is preferable to the continued sufferings of their families.' He spat in the empty hearth. 'If you grind down sulphur, saltpetre and carbon hard enough you'll have an explosion. Human beings are far away the more combustible. I tell you there'll be an explosion.'

'Why are they on the point of revolt?' asked Willi.

'Because the Government is evil!' said Farice.

'Nonsense!' snapped Willi. 'Evil might have been an acceptable diagnosis in the Middle Ages, but not now. Let's forget evil and say: "We are against the way the Government acts."'

'The way they act is determined by the fact that they are evil,' said Farice.

'They're human beings and from your own creed all men have souls and are sons of God. They're human and like all intelligent human beings, they have minds and can change them. Why should we overthrow them if we can make them act differently?'

'Do you really believe they can climb out of the rut of their evil ways?' asked Farice. 'They, who are anti-Christ? They who persecute the Church and believe not in God?'

'The Church has done some foul things in the name of God

before now!' snapped Willi. Muller watched the tempers rising. 'You'll never have the Christian principles of love and freedom without a strong Church,' said Farice.

'Wait a minute,' Muller said, 'we'll get nowhere by falling out. This is too big for personal hates. Let's calm down, talk quietly, reasonably.'

'I'm sorry,' said Willi, 'but I believe that open revolution will strengthen the very men we wish to overthrow.'

'There are times when sins can only be purged by suffering,' said Farice. Willi nodded.

He said: 'Maybe one or two of them are evil, but let's give the rest of them, the good ones, a chance to win through. If we fight in the streets Beradin will crush our unorganized resistance even though we have a few guns from the West. At the same time he'll consolidate his power for doing harm and eliminate the very men who want to be on our side.'

'Who are the men in the Government who want to be on our side?' asked a smooth voice from the doorway. All three jerked round. They saw Wolff. Willi held on to his knowledge. Now was not the time to tell.

'How did you get in?' asked Farice.

'The back way . . . but tell me, I never knew we had friends in the Government. I thought they were all our enemies?'

'Of course they are!' said Farice. Willi felt the spirit of the meeting going against him. He turned to Muller.

'You have a family, you have friends, you live with the men who'll do the fighting. They aren't pawns to be sacrificed.' Muller shook his head.

'You're too late. They'll not listen to reason. They don't want talk. The Government's reasoned, promised rewards, but they're sick of words. Now they want action. They want to surge into the streets and shout and tear things down to ease the torment that's grown inside them. They want to prove to themselves that they are still men, even at the cost of life itself.'

* 'He's right,' said Wolff. 'They'll revolt whether we like it or not. We have to give them arms, from the West. We have to fix the time.'

'No, no,' said Willi, 'revolt will make things even worse. It will prove that the Police State is necessary.' Wolff walked up

to the table, pulled out the fourth chair. 'I am a man of action,' he said. 'From experience I have learnt that opportunities must be seized. When Herlich dies, the Government will be indecisive. That will be our opportunity, our only opportunity. If we let it pass, our enemies will grow strong again.'

'Exactly!' said Farice. 'From every viewpoint it is essential that we act.' He turned to Willi and said: 'You are alone.'

'Not so fast,' said Muller. 'Counter revolution is a serious thing. It'll take more than a few hundred untrained men to overthrow the police and the Army.'

'And the other communist countries—will they stand by and watch it happen?' asked Willi.

'We are not alone,' said Farice. 'There are good men in the police and the Army who, when the fighting starts, will join us, and many more who will refuse to shoot at their fellow countrymen. As for Russia and the other satellites—they have their own troubles. I believe that this is our last chance. Is it not strange that at this dreadful moment in history men with a proven capacity for evil are being struck down?'

'Aye,' said Muller, nodding his head slowly. 'It's a queer sort of coincidence.'

'Let's take the vote then.'

'We can't decide anything until Thorp arrives. After all he is providing the guns.'

'Who's Thorp?' asked Wollf.

'He's the contact man,' said Farice.

'I think Willi's trying to delay us. Let's take a vote,' said Wollf. Farice and Wollf raised their fingers. Muller looked at Willi.

'I'm sorry, Willi, but they'll be out in the streets whether they have arms or not. At least let's give them something to fight with,' said he, and raised his hand. Willi shook his head.

'I don't know. . . .'

'You've no choice now,' said Wollf, 'it's three to one.'

'Give me time,' said Willi.

'Time!' laughed Wollf, 'when Herlich might die at any moment and we've still to collect the guns.' Willi looked at Wollf again. Farice stood up.

'How long will you need to come to terms with yourself?' he asked.

'I don't know.'

'May God give you strength to reach the right decision, terrible as it is, for all of us. Don't think that I want to see men die, but sometimes death is the only sacrifice that will purify the world of evil.' Willi tried to smile. At least Farice knew his problem. At least he understood.

'I wonder what's happened to Thorp,' said Muller.

'He'll be here,' said Willi. 'He's reliable.'

'What is he?' asked Wolff, 'English?'

'English, American, French,' said Muller, 'what does it matter?' They sat around in uneasy silence, straightening in their chairs at every new sound.

'If only they had food,' said Muller, 'we might be able to reason with them. But men won't listen when their children are starving.'

'He's here,' said Willi.

Thorp stood thin and balding in the doorway, his blue eyes looking small because of the many wrinkles in the skin. He stroked his long and concave nose. He looked very quiet and peaceful and relaxed.

'Where's the coffin?' he asked, searching the faces, 'I thought I'd walked into a wake.' His eyes rested on Wolff. He took two precise steps into the room. 'Who's this?' he asked, his eyes still on Wolff. Wolff stood up.

'I'm Wolff.'

'That means nothing to me.'

'He runs a rat-line,' said Muller. 'He ties up with Willi at the frontier.'

'Do you vouch for him?' asked Thorp. Willi frowned.

'I don't know, now,' he said.

'You don't seem very certain,' said Thorp, and smiled and showed his teeth, small, brown and even. He lit a small cheroot and blew a mouthful of smoke into the still air. 'Herlich's dead.'

*'How do you know?' asked Wolff, then 'Has it been broadcast?'

'Haven't we met before?' asked Thorp. He blew a thin stream of smoke at the light. 'I think I know where it was. I was in Warsaw when the Polish underground rose prematurely against

the Germans. The Red Army camped on the outskirts of the city, then withdrew until the Germans had obliterated the patriots. I seem to place you there.' Wollf shrugged his shoulders.

'I have been to Poland.'

'I'll remember,' said Thorp.

'Herlich's dead,' said Farice. 'That doesn't leave much time.'

'The news is not generally known. It may not be for some time yet,' said Thorp.

'We need arms immediately,' said Farice.

'I . . .' started Willi.

'We decided, before you came, that revolt is inevitable,' said Farice. 'We must fight in the streets, storm the prisons. If we forsake our friends in gaol, how can we expect help from the West?' Thorp looked at Willi.

'You still don't look enthusiastic,' he said.

'I too remember Warsaw.'

'But they'll not listen,' said Muller. 'We must give them a chance. They must have arms.'

'It is our duty to God. The world is waiting for a sign,' said Farice.

'They're weak,' said Wollf. 'Now is the time to strike.'

'You know,' said Thorp, 'they might even stand a chance with such ardent leaders.'

'I shall be in the vanguard,' said Farice, his face noble. Neither Wollf nor Muller said anything.

'Maybe I'm getting old,' said Thorp. 'When I was young I used to go hell-for-leather at anything once the idea had been planted in my mind. Now I'm cautious. I don't rush. It's one thing starting the ball rolling, but another controlling it. I don't like running into lamp posts.'

'We're not playing games,' said Wollf, and looked to Farice for support.

'When can you deliver the guns?' asked Farice.

'You are remarkably bloodthirsty for a priest.'

'Our Lord used a whip on the moneylenders.'

'Why pick on that? He did many other things too.'

'When do we get the guns?'

'There'll be no more arms,' said Thorp.

'What!' said Wollf.

'This is treachery!' said Farice.

'Not guns, but food parcels.' Thorp smiled. He watched Wollf's face out of the corner of his eye.

'Food parcels,' said Willi. 'That's good, that's rich.' He laughed. He turned to Muller. 'Now what do you say?' he asked.

'You're fooling,' said Wollf.

'Ask the others,' said Thorp, 'they know me better,' then added, 'I quite like the idea of food parcels.'

'Where and when?' said Wollf.

'They'll be stored just beyond the frontier.'

'I'll not allow my men to transport food parcels,' said Wollf.

'You'll not have to,' said Thorp. 'The people will collect their own.'

'This is treachery,' said Farice. 'Bribery, tempting men from their duty by appealing to the hunger of the body.'

'Wasn't that why they would fight—because they were hungry?' asked Willi.

'I hope it works,' said Muller.

'They'll never allow them to cross,' said Wollf.

'Won't they?' asked Thorp. 'Guards will fire on spies and saboteurs, but not on men, women and children going to collect food. Anyway that's what will happen—and no more guns.'

'We'll see,' said Farice. 'They won't all be bought by offers of butter and sugar.'

'Some people never grow up,' said Thorp.

'Is that all?' asked Willi, looking at his watch.

'We'll go together,' said Thorp, 'the rest of you can follow at intervals.'

'We'll leave the back way,' said Willi, and shook hands all round except with Wollf. They walked to the end of the corridor, stood facing the night until their eyes became accustomed to the darkness, then Willi, instead of walking through the yard into the alleyway, opened the wash-house door and drew Thorp in after him. They saw a shaft of light stab the grime-stained kitchen window. A moment later a figure drifted across the yard. Willi counted to twenty then followed.

'That's Wollf,' he said.

'Follow him,' said Thorp, 'and I'll follow you in the car.' Wollf turned the corner. Two streets later he climbed into the

back seat of a black saloon. A man was already sitting in the driving seat. Willi watched the car slide from the kerb and head towards the suburbs. He raised his arm and beckoned Thorp and climbed in the saloon.

'We'll see where he goes,' said Thorp. 'You have something on him?' Willi nodded.

'Do you know anything definite?'

'We'll just wait and see,' said Willi.

'I wonder who he wants to tell about the food parcels. It hit him right between the eyes.'

Wolff's car sped along the north circular road followed a quarter of a mile behind by Thorp.

'He's turned off,' said Willi.

'Can you guess where he's going?'

'No.'

'Beradin has a house out here.'

They reached the corner in time to see the black saloon drive between two floodlit gates.

'We'll go straight on,' said Thorp. 'That's the Beradin town house. No wonder the news about food parcels burnt a hole in his pocket!'

'Don't you realize what this means?' asked Willi.

'Take it easy,' said Thorp, his voice almost crooning.

'But the others—they don't know.'

'I'll take care of them. You stay here in the car and follow Wolff; contact me later in the café.' Thorp slipped out of the driving seat. Before he closed the door he asked:

'You've nothing more important to do?' Willi thought of Gerda.

'No,' he said. 'No, it can wait.'

Wolff found Beradin in his study.

'The Americans are trying to stop the riots,' he said.

Beradin nodded his head. He blinked and said:

'Stop the riots?'

'They're giving away food parcels instead of guns.'

Beradin stood up.

'Food parcels?' he said. He frowned then raised his eyebrows and blinked again.

'Do we know an agent called Thorp?' asked Wolff.

Beradin made an effort and roused himself. He said:
'Not by that name,' and walked over to a hatchway and spoke to a clerk.

'Give me the rogues' gallery,' he said, and waited.

He took the heavy album in both hands and opened it on his desk.

'You might find him in here, I don't know . . .'

Wolff flicked over the pages. He said:

'He's small, self-contained—said he'd been in Warsaw during the occupation.' He looked at the photographs on the last page and shook his head. 'He must be new.'

'Or clever,' said Beradin.

'Has the Englishman talked yet?'

'No.'

'Let me interrogate him,' said Wolff.

'Later,' said Beradin, and returned the book through the hatchway and closed the sliding door. He walked towards a filing cabinet then changed his mind and sat down behind the desk. He looked at his fingers drumming the blotting pad.

'I must have proof that the party is in danger,' he said.

Wolff lit a cigarette.

'There might be one or two incidents. Farice is still breathing blood and fire,' said Wolff, watching Beradin, 'but nothing on a large scale.'

Beradin drew sharp triangles on the pad of blotting paper then threw the pencil down and said: 'A few outbursts will convince no one.' He shrugged his shoulders. His mouth remained open. 'And I'm not even certain of my own men,' he added. Wolff thought he looked older, much older.

'You're tired,' said Wolff, 'you've been working too hard. You talk as if you'd already been defeated.'

'I alone really miss Herlich.' Beradin pressed his hands flat on the table, then relaxed.

* 'You know what he'd have said. Strike first. Arrest the lot,' said Wolff.

'If we did the Army would step in.'

'Why not arrest a few generals too?'

'Try telephoning any one of them,' said Beradin. 'You'll find

them all in barracks. We're not strong enough to fight the Army on its own ground.'

'I thought you'd packed the Politburo?'

'I had. But I'm certain neither of Schmidt nor of some of the others.'

'Well let's go to work on him.'

'Schmidt?' Wollf nodded.

'His wife is expecting a baby.'

'He's not worried about her, he's running a mistress.'

'What about her?' Beradin shook his head.

'Well let's get him over here. Let's make an example of him.'

'I daren't risk losing Schmidt's vote.'

'Herlich would have prevented him going over to Grundel.'

'Herlich is dead,' said Beradin slowly.

'We all die one day,' said Wollf, but Beradin didn't hear him.

'He was part God, part father. I think I worshipped him.' Beradin shuddered and tried to control his hands by gripping the edge of the desk.

'I thought you were going to carry on where he left off?' said Wollf.

Beradin wiped a thumb across his forehead, then said: 'His mind wandered, at the end.'

Wollf, failing to notice that Beradin was talking partly to himself, said: 'Herlich would have said: "They either vote for me or for no one."'

'Herlich would have said that months ago,' said Beradin.

'Let's bring them in,' said Wollf. At last he noticed something odd. Beradin was doodling, wandering, indecisive. He wondered if Beradin could fill Herlich's shoes. Wollf narrowed his eyelids. Beradin had to be an instrument, otherwise Herlich would never have trusted him with such tremendous police power for so long. Now the operator had died the instrument would either be scrapped or used by someone else. It couldn't function by itself. Wollf looked at Beradin. 'You really do miss Herlich,' he said.

'We came from the same village. We were together, all the way through, right until the end.' The memory of the last minutes of Herlich's life rose like a spectre before his mind's eye. Beradin realized he was losing his grip. He must assert himself.

He must take over where Herlich had left off. A feeling of panic fluttered through the grey corridors of his mind. He was alone in the centre of a huge building of many rooms and floors and corridors. He had to find his way by himself. He caught a frightening glimpse of the vastness of the building and was aware that he had no Herlich to run back to. Wolff was staring at him. Beradin knew he must strike a terror greater than his own into the hearts of both his opponents and his supporters.

'Telephone Schmidt,' said Beradin, speaking rapidly. 'Tell him I want to see him at once.'

Wolff smiled.

'Go on!' said Beradin, 'what are you waiting for?'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KURT took one last look at the peacefully sleeping faces of his wife and son, then closed the door quietly. A great gladness filled his heart and spilled out from his eyes. At last he had found something stable and worth while on which to build, if only he had the strength. He licked his lips. He had to be strong. It was now or never. He walked into the kitchen to the nurse who was elbow deep at the sink washing blood-stained towels.

'I'll be back before they wake up,' he said.

As he left the flat he knew that this was perhaps his last chance of asserting his manhood and individuality. Instead of floating helplessly in the ebb and flow of national and international society he must carve out of the part chaos, part order, a place for himself and his family. He had to find the strength to face Beradin. His love for Leila was strong, the one strong and firm thing in the whole universe. He had to prove himself strong. He drove quietly away towards the suburbs. Twenty minutes after leaving the flat he was confronting Beradin.

'Sit down,' said Beradin and smiled to show hospitality.

'You wanted to see me,' said Kurt.

'Make yourself comfortable,' said Beradin, gesturing with a close-fingered hand towards a chair.

'I'd rather stand.'

'I'm your friend,' said Beradin. 'I want to help you.'

'I'll choose my own friends,' Beradin frowned.

He said: 'I don't think you understand. Only the news of Herlich's death saved you.'

'Is that all you wanted to tell me?' Kurt was frightened by his own confidence. He experienced a strange sense of dignity, of being completely master of himself and a servant to no one. Yet he could not forget the memory of his past weakness.

Beradin dug the point of the pencil into the blotting paper, then stood up and walked away from his desk. He clasped both hands behind his back.

'You've changed,' he said.

'I'm no longer afraid,' said Kurt, a shade too defiantly.

'I can see that.'

'I've found something more satisfying than the State.'

'Something bigger?' Kurt shook his head.

'You wouldn't understand.'

'I might if you told me,' said Beradin. Kurt said nothing.

'And it gives you strength to stand alone?'

'Not alone,' Kurt said.

'I need your support,' said Beradin, 'to continue the Police State. Grundel and Rummel hold you responsible for the agricultural failures. If they gain power . . .'

'They aren't the real enemy,' said Kurt.

'Nonsense,' said Beradin. 'You never knew the starvation and misery that only the Party conquered. All you can see is the result. We are making progress. As soon as we save a little, build any stocks, you want to relax and enjoy it. But it won't work. We must drive on ruthlessly, force the people to do what we know is necessary.'

'You can't force people once their backs are up.'

'Can't you?' asked Beradin, then after a pause in which he eyed Schmidt, added: 'I don't like doing this.' He picked up the switch to the office broadcaster. 'Send in Wollf,' he said, then turned to Kurt. 'You've not met Wollf, have you?' Kurt shook his head. 'He's my private executioner. He arranges mysterious

illnesses. But I don't like doing this to you.' He replaced the telephone. A long silence developed. At last Kurt said:

'What are you going to do?' His voice trembled in a low key.

'I thought I could count on you,' said Beradin, 'but if I can't, no one else shall.' Kurt sat down in the chair, his hands resting limply in his lap. He felt his shoulders slump forward.

'That's better,' said Beradin. 'Now you realize who your friends are.'

'What are your terms?'

'I need your vote.'

'And after?'

'You won't have to face a trial. . . .'

Schmidt straightened his shoulders as the door opened. Wolff looked from one to the other.

'Schmidt has discovered that he is important,' said Beradin.

'Living or dead?' asked Wolff, and closed the door.

'Take a good look at him,' said Beradin.

'Give me time to think,' said Kurt. Beradin ignored him and spoke to Wolff.

'He either votes for me or for no one. Time's too short for bargaining.'

'He could just disappear,' said Wolff.

'You'd never get away with that,' said Kurt. 'If I disappear you'll frighten everyone over to Grundel.'

Beradin appeared not to have heard.

'I think it had better be either an accident or an illness. How long will that take?'

'Twenty-four hours!'

'Quicker than that.'

'Twelve!'

'Go ahead and make all the arrangements. But do nothing irrevocable until you hear from me.' Wolff smiled and showed his eye-teeth, then walked through the doorway. Beradin turned on Kurt.

¹⁴ 'You've lived long enough to know I'm not fooling. I'll give you until to-morrow morning. If I don't hear from you by then, I'll turn Wolff loose.' Kurt stared at Beradin while words clothed the ideas clamouring to be spoken.

'You won't beat Grundel this way. I don't know that you'll

even beat me. We're sick and tired of this darkness. We want to see daylight, to grow sturdy again.' Kurt tasted words of personal defiance on the tip of his tongue. He wanted to tell Beradin that threats, force, even death were powerless against the will to live his own life, to love his family, but the fear that defiance might prevent him ever seeing Leila again dried the words in his mouth. 'Who is "we"?' asked Beradin. Kurt looked away and the palms of his hands turned outwards away from his thighs. He realized he was making excuses for his own weakness.

'You have until the morning,' said Beradin.

'Can't you see that times are changing? Can't you feel the tension in the air and the look in men's eyes?' If only Beradin would realize, if only he would be reasonable, then no sacrifice would be necessary.

'You're weak,' said Beradin. 'You'll do as I say. That's why you are where you are, because you're weak and easy to handle.' Schmidt tried to fill his lungs with air to overcome the sensation of breathlessness. 'I can go now?' he asked, giving in to the wish to escape. Beradin nodded. Kurt walked to the door on legs that moved of their own volition. No one could blame him for wanting to see Leila and his newborn child again. At least let him do that before facing the test.

'Wolff will be watching you all the time,' said Beradin.

'I'll give you my answer to-morrow.'

'Life, even as an official, is sweet,' said Beradin.

As Kurt followed the guard out of the building he felt miserably aware of his failure. He drove quickly back to his flat, glancing at the headlights that shone continually from behind on to his driving mirror and cast the shadow of his own car on to the road ahead.

He opened the flat door, quickly closed it and shot home the bolt. He looked at his face in the hall-stand mirror and rubbed his cheeks to restore some colour. He walked briskly into the lounge.

'She's still asleep,' said the nurse. She stood in the kitchen, her hands and arms painfully clean from washing clothes in hot water. 'You look as if you need some rest yourself,' she said.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm tired.' He walked to the bedroom door, hesitated with his hand against the lock, then entered. He walked

to the windows, adjusted the curtains, then bent down and kissed her. She opened her eyes.

'Had a good sleep?' he asked, swallowing the troubles that pressed at the back of his throat. She nodded. Her eyes and lips blossomed into a smile as fragile and vulnerable as apple blossom.

'Darling,' he said, and knelt down, burying his head in the warmth of her arm and breast. The front door was bolted but the clock ticked away the seconds. He blinked before raising his head.

'You're so very precious,' he said, looking deep into her eyes.

'Something's worrying you,' she said. 'I know the signs. Tell me. . . .

'Nothing's wrong,' he said, but he saw from the knowledge deep in her eyes that he had failed to convince her. He cleared his throat.

'It's just that I've a difficult choice to make. I don't want to think of anything but you and the baby.' She drew a pattern with the point of her index finger on the back of his hand.

'Are you sure that's all?'

'Nothing that can come between us.'

'Darling,' she said. 'Why not share it? I'll worry more about something vague and unknown.'

'You've enough to think about,' he said. She squeezed his hand.

When at last he looked at her she asked: 'What is it?'

'Herlich died this afternoon.'

'He was old, very old.'

'He left no successor.'

'Will there be . . . purges? Is that what's worrying you?' Kurt stood up and clenched his fists.

'Why can't they leave us alone?'

'Who will you support?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm caught in between.' He sat down by her side.

'Leila,' he asked, 'would you be able to manage if anything happened to me?'

'You mustn't talk like that.'

'If I do what I know is right it might mean . . .

'You're too honest. Can't you be cunning, like the others?'

'Cunning . . .' he repeated. He nodded his head slowly. He sat in silence for a long time. He looked at the clock.

'When do we feed the baby?'

'Not until the third day or so.'

'He seems a good baby.'

'Like his father.'

'Do you think so?' he asked, but the smile slowly faded into the distance.

'Why don't you come to bed?' she asked. 'You look tired.'

'I'll just say good night to the nurse.' He stood up and smiled. 'Give me five minutes.'

The nurse was putting on her coat and hat.

'You'll be here in the morning?' he asked.

'Of course.'

'Will you do me a favour?'

'Depends what it is.'

'Will you ring a friend of mine and ask him to come round here before seven o'clock in the morning? Tell him it's very urgent.' The nurse looked at the black shining receiver on the table.

'Can't you ring through yourself?' she asked.

'No,' he said. She fastened the top button of her tunic and pulled on her black gloves. She stood without answering, staring at the wall.

'What's the number?' she asked.

'931-267, his name's Grundel.'

'Suppose he's not there?'

'He has to be there.'

'Can't you ask anyone else?'

'No.' She smiled suddenly.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'Things often have a way of turning out well where little babies are concerned.' She let herself into the corridor. He stared at the closed door.

'If only they did,' he said. 'If only they did.' He switched out the light, drew the curtains and looked down into the street. A swarm of moths danced round the bright street lamp. A cigarette end glowed inside a black saloon car parked obviously on the corner. Kurt opened the window slowly and firmly, then walked into the bedroom.

Leila fell asleep with her head pillowed in the crook of Kurt's arm. Long into the night he stared at the shadow pattern of the window thrown on to the bedroom ceiling by the street lamp, then fell uneasily asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THIS is no way to treat an Englishman!' roared Wollf. 'Get out!' The guard saluted stoically and marched from the prison office.

'Please be seated,' said Wollf. Granger felt for the chair and sat down unsteadily.

'I've only just heard about your arrest,' explained Wollf, 'otherwise I'd have been here sooner.'

'You wouldn't pull my leg, would you?' asked Granger.

'Our struggle is not against the English people,' said Wollf. He offered Granger a cigarette. Granger hesitated, then took one.

'We admire your courage,' said Wollf, 'but think it misapplied.' Granger tried to crawl back into his shell.

'What do you think they'll do for your wife and family?' Wollf asked and lit a cigarette. Granger listened unwillingly. Wollf smiled.

'You are a brave man, willing to fight for your ideal of democracy alongside your allies, the Japanese and Germans and Spaniards.' Granger frowned. 'How short is your memory?' asked Wollf, then blew out a stream of smoke.

'Tell me,' he continued, 'which public school did Mr. Attlee go to, and all the other so-called people's representatives?' Wollf stood up. 'What use is courage if you are a dupe? Think it over.'

'Before I go,' said Wollf. 'Morris never wanted to escape. He's quite happy with us.'

The guard returned and led Granger back to one of four special cells constructed by medieval craftsmen. As Granger was locked in, Gerda's father was led out. They did not meet.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THROUGH the fog Kurt heard the raw cry of the baby. He raised himself on one elbow and knuckled the sleep from his eyelids. He looked down at Leila, then at the clock and wondered how long the child had been bawling. He slid out of bed and stood large over the bundle in the cot, looking down on the red wrinkled face and wide-open blue-tipped mouth. Twenty-four hours old, he thought, and he creates hell because he's uncomfortable. Twenty-four hours old and he makes people take notice. He stooped down and with fingers clumsy with inexperience picked up the babe and felt some of the stiff-limbed anger leave the tight little bundle. The head jerked inwards towards his chest. 'Sorry, son,' he said. 'I can't help you.' He felt a draught on his forearm and closed the window. Then he remembered. He stood still. He looked over his shoulder and saw the black saloon with a man's arm resting on the open driving window. He looked down at the child. 'It's real, son,' he said, 'it's still there, and I've got to go out and face it.' He walked to the bed and sat down on the edge. He tickled Leila's ear, then, when she snuggled deeper into the bed-clothes, rolled her back-wards and forwards by the shoulder like a buoy in deep water. She opened one eye and scowled, then saw the child in Kurt's arms. A sleepy smile spread from her lips and she raised her head.

'What time is it?'

'Time to change his nappies.'

'Already?' She heaved herself up out of the pillows, sighed, smiled at the sight of the babe, then held out her arms. Leila raised her eyebrows, half in apology, half in the wonder of fulfilment.

'He is wet,' she said.

'I've never seen you look more beautiful,' said Kurt, then his eyes strayed to the sunlight slanting low through the window. 'I'll make some breakfast.'

'No, stay.'

'He doesn't need me,' he said. 'He wants you, all of you. We can have breakfast together after you've cuddled him.'

As he walked slowly away Leila said: 'Bring me a bowl of

water and a clean towel and a nappy from the cistern . . . please.' He turned and formed a kiss with his lips.

'Of course I will,' he said.

He stood in the centre of the lounge and looked round his home. He only saw it in the early morning and late at night, sometimes not even then when he slept at the Ministry. He rested his hand on a chair-back and felt the tough material with his finger tips. The chair went with the flat and the flat with the job. Oh, for a place he could call his own, a place for his family, a retreat where he could feel safe. His feet dragged over the carpet, past the telephone to the kitchen. His hands turned on the tap and filled the kettle. His eyes glanced wildly round the walls then calmed. He plugged in the kettle. Life would go on. Leila might miss him for a while. His son would not even remember him. Once he could accept that as the natural order he could also accept his own liquidation. He laughed quietly at the cruel joke and walked into the bathroom to collect a nappy.

'Do you think he's warm enough?' asked Leila. As Kurt looked down the little head jerked and opened the eyes for the first time.

'His eyes are blue,' said Leila, and looked up. He knelt down and put his head inside the family circle. This is important, he thought.

'He's the most important thing in the world,' he said, 'with his mother . . . and his blue eyes.'

'He's lovely,' said Leila, and rubbed the little back and shifted so that the babe's face touched Kurt's unshaven cheek.

Leila cuddled a little longer, then bedded the infant. Over breakfast in bed she said:

'I'd like to call him Kurt after you.'

'He deserves a name of his own, a name suggesting courage and compassion.'

'We could call him Karl,' she said. The front door bell rang. Kurt felt his heart ache. He stood up and looked at the clock.

'I'd better see who it is.'

'If it's the nurse, bring her in for a cup,' said Leila. Kurt nodded. He closed the door on her and walked step by step to answer the bell. Wolff stood in the hallway.

'You're early,' said Kurt. Wollf smiled.

'You haven't telephoned Beradin,' he said, and walked inside. He looked round the room. He saw the nappies drying on the line in the kitchen.

'Where's your wife?' he asked, and sat down in an easy chair.

'She's asleep.'

'And the baby?'

Kurt licked his lips and said: 'Asleep.'

'Beradin thinks you don't care tuppence for your wife.'

'He's right,' said Kurt.

'When a man loves his family, he's easy to handle. . . .'

'Have you a family?'

'No.'

'Mother or father alive?'

'Stepfather,' said Wollf, 'and the bastard's in prison, as he deserves.'

'Do you mind waiting for the nurse before we leave?'

'You expect her back?'

'Naturally.'

'After asking her to telephone Grundel?' Kurt rubbed his chest over the heart. He breathed in slowly and deeply.

Leila called from the bedroom: 'Who is it, darling?'

'They want me at the office,' he answered.

'Oh, no!' said Leila, her voice sharp with disappointment.

'So you don't care a damn for your wife,' whispered Wollf. He picked up the telephone at his elbow, dialled and spoke to Beradin. 'He's on our side,' he said. 'You were wrong about his family. He's a father now. It's made all the difference.' He replaced the receiver and looked up. The smile slowly left his face. 'You'd better say goodbye to your wife,' he said. 'Whether you see her again depends on how you behave.'

Kurt felt the blood pounding in his brain, felt his eyes widen and the breath whistle between his lips. If only he could lose control and go berserk and smash Wollf, but he knew the consequences and they weighed too heavily.

'Don't do anything stupid,' said Wollf, and stood up. Kurt's anger reached even higher. He glared hatred at Wollf, but still retained a slender control.

'I'd better say goodbye,' he said, and turned away. He opened the bedroom door and without entering said:

'I'm just popping down to the office—I'll not be long.' Leila smiled sleepily.

'Wake me as soon as you come back?' she said, and closed her weary eyes. Then he closed the door again.

'Do one thing for me,' he said to Wolff, 'let the nurse come?'

'I'll do anything your wife needs,' he said, 'I'm staying here!' 'You!'

'It's time you left for the Ministry. The meeting starts in half an hour,' Wolff sneered at Kurt. Sheep, he thought. You can drive them to the slaughter.

A grey cell in Kurt's brain exploded with all the force of escaping passion and sent a blinding red flame mushrooming to the walls of his skull. A wild unreasoning ecstasy travelled like lightning down his spine and into his biceps and thighs. His fist drove forward with his shoulder and whole body behind. His knuckles bashed into Wolff's nose and flattened it over the cheekbones on either side. Wolff tried to dodge but Kurt's fist mashed into his face and sent him sprawling sideways over the arm of the chair. Kurt sprang at the back of Wolff's neck and hit it with the heel of his fist, then thumped the soft area of kidney until he realized that Wolff was senseless. He stood back and listened to his heart pounding. He felt elated, willing, eager to fight an army of Wolffs. He dragged the senseless body to the open window, knelt down, wrapped one of Wolff's arms around his own neck and heaved until the backside rested on the ledge. Then he heard the shrilling of the doorbell.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A LARGER than life portrait of Herlich smiled down upon the four men of the Inner Politburo. 'Where's Schmidt?' asked Beradin, picking at his cuff as if it were frayed.

'We'll give him another five minutes, then we must start,' said Grundel.

'We cannot start without him,' said Kordov, who had just flown in from Moscow. The seconds ticked slowly by. Beradin was the first to look up. The door opened. Schmidt made no apology.

'You're late,' snapped Kordov.

'I've been involved in an accident,' Schmidt said, looking at Beradin. 'Sorry to keep you all waiting.'

Beradin picked up his pencil. He coughed.

'Our first task is to elect a chairman.' He glanced towards the vacant seat at the head of the table.

'I propose that you act as chairman,' said Kordov, without raising his eyes. Grundel cleared his throat.

'For this one exploratory meeting, or to succeed Herlich?' he asked.

'For this one meeting,' said Schmidt suddenly. Hermann looked at Grundel and nodded.

'We agree,' he said. Beradin stood up.

'The chairman as usual will have the casting vote,' he said, and sat down at the head of the table with his back to the portrait.

'The agenda?' asked Hermann.

'Agenda?' asked Beradin.

'To decide who shall succeed Herlich, of course.'

'I propose Beradin,' said Kordov. Grundel laughed.

A red flush coloured the back of Kordov's neck. Schmidt blinked and jerked down his chin.

'Not so quickly,' said Grundel. 'The choice is not only between individuals, but between policies.'

'Must we waste time . . . ?' said Beradin.

'I propose we put it to the vote straight away,' said Kordov. 'Herlich's death was no surprise. We've all had time to think things over.'

'This is the first opportunity we've had for discussion as equals,' said Grundel. 'Someone may have a suggestion of value.' He looked straight at Schmidt. Kurt shifted his chair.

'I'd like to talk things over first,' he said, very quietly, hesitating after each word.

'My policy,' said Beradin, 'is simple. We carry on along the lines drawn by Herlich. There can be no relaxation.'

'I agree,' said Kordov.

'We all agree that strength must be built up. We differ only on methods,' said Grundel.

'My method is a continuation of the one at present in force.'

'Then I cannot vote for you,' said Grundel.

'Neither can I,' said Hermann.

Beradin glanced from Schmidt and Kordov to Grundel.

'What alternatives do you suggest?' he asked.

'Only the desire for personal gain, or fear of personal loss, blinds us to the need for a change—and that only for a very short time,' said Grundel.

'Fear? What fear?' snapped Beradin.

'If you removed your blinkers, the blinkers Herlich strapped on your mind . . .' said Grundel, in a calm, even voice.

'This is outrageous!' said Kordov. 'Herlich was a great man.'

'I'll come to you in a minute,' said Grundel. He turned to Beradin who was busy with a pencil, piercing a pattern of holes in the blotting pad.

'You can see only the unpleasant side of the human personality. You think only in terms of fear. During the period when fear was the driving force you were an excellent instrument. That period is now over. Now the motivation has to come from inside, from the worker himself.'

'Must we listen to this in the name of discussion?' said Kordov. But Beradin only scribbled on, as if he were afraid to look up. Grundel turned to Kordov. 'Your mind is closed to all but the narrowest analysis. It has grown too small to analyse foreign affairs under any but a villain-hero basis. This basis is not built up from a knowledge of all the facts. Some facts, for instance, a genuinely friendly act by a capitalist country, being too difficult to fit into your rigid brain cell pattern, is labelled a trap and discarded. Consequently our foreign policy has turned States that once might have been helpful into enemies. Now you use the same hide-bound method of analysis in this problem.' Grundel turned back to Beradin. 'Similarly,' he said, 'all our internal mistakes and shortcomings have been blamed on to sabotage by the enemies in our midst. The real causes have been ignored. They can be ignored no longer. We must choose between destroying either a false body of political and economic doctrine, or destroying the State.'

Beradin, without looking up from his drawings, said:

'You have dealt with Kordov and myself. Now what about Schmidt?' A silence stretched across the room. Then Grundel said:

'Both you and Kordov have passed the crossroads. Schmidt is standing there, as yet undecided which way to go. Your system has a hold of him, but if he is man enough . . .'

'What do you mean by that bourgeois phrase "man enough"?' asked Kordov.

Grundel leant forward: 'Everything that fails to fit into your own blinkered outlook is labelled bourgeois.'

'What do you mean by "man enough"?'

'I know what he means,' said Schmidt. Kordov looked to the head of the table in alarm. The pencil slid from Beradin's fingers. He shivered and looked round at the portrait of Herlich as if it were alive and breathing coldly down the back of his neck.

'You know what he means?' he asked. Schmidt raised his head against a great weight.

'A man,' he said slowly, 'can only go so far without realizing what is happening. Sooner or later he realizes his own self-consistency is being destroyed. He realizes that another step will lead to the disintegration of his personality, that he will cease to be, that he will no longer be a man, but a puppet controlled by outside forces, by another person's decisions. A man worthy of the name will refuse to step beyond that point. . . .' His voice lowered a key. 'I refuse to step beyond that point.'

Hermann's eyes blazed encouragement across the table.

'This has nothing to do with electing a successor to Herlich!' said Kordov, trying hard to play down the significance of Schmidt's words.

Grundel looked through the gauze of Kordov's acting then turned to Beradin.

'Your policies have forced men to the point of desperation. Schmidt was once your loyal supporter. Now you will accuse him of being a Western spy. It worked once, perhaps twice, but clever bureaucrats and brilliant scientists don't fall for such stupidities more than once. Even if you liquidate Schmidt for his courage, will his successor step eagerly into shoes whose owner die so quickly? No. The time has come to call a halt, to

be as courageous a nation as Schmidt is an individual. As a nation we willingly contribute to our own exploitation by Russia. Most of our major economic problems would be capable of solution if we received our fair share of profit from our nationalized industries. Our cattle, our grain flows over the frontier to bolster a Russian economy suffering from an advanced state of our own disease. We transport Russian freight below cost, let them exploit our oil wells. We provide the labour, the land, half the capital and they share the product and profit! We give away our resources and in return, what?

'This talk is sabotage and treachery,' said Kordov, his eyes wide with horror.

'This is the truth,' said Grundel, and he looked long and hard at Kordov. 'If only you knew what you were doing, could analyse your thoughts! This cry of sabotage is typical. You feed in a black card and the computer says capitalist swine—kill him, capitalist swine, there's trickery in that offer. One day you'll put in a black card with your own name on it and the machine will say capitalist swine, kill him. Then it'll be too late. You'll sentence yourself to death. The whole system is a reproduction of your mind. Now is the time for reconstruction. Once when only drastic action could save us, the black-white system worked, ruthlessly and quickly. Now we need a subtler instrument before the system turns on its master.'

'Is that all?' asked Kordov.

'No,' said Grundel. 'Rather than be led by the nose to our own destruction, as individuals, as politicians, and as a nation, I propose that we call a halt, overthrow the old policy. We have the means. We need only the determination.'

'How do you propose dealing with the Red Army?' asked Kordov.

'The way the Finns and the Yugoslavs dealt with it! The way Schmidt dealt with Beradin.'

'They were strong, we are weak.'

'We are as strong as our own determination.'

'Let's take the vote,' said Hermann.

'I propose Beradin,' said Kordov.

'A seconder?' asked Beradin. Schmidt sat quietly. He was no longer alone. He gained strength from his allies. He watched

Beradin reach for the telephone, heard him ask for his flat number, saw his mouth compress. He looked at the black-centred eyes.

'Wolff?' he heard Beradin ask, then: 'Who is that?' Beradin slowly replaced the receiver and looked at Schmidt.

'What has happened to Wolff?' he asked.

'I lost my temper with him,' said Schmidt. Beradin stood up.

'The meeting's closed,' he said.

'Not so quickly,' said Grundel. 'If you resign we shall carry on without you.'

'We must let the assembly choose Herlich's successor,' said Beradin. Kordov stood up alongside Beradin. They walked to the door, opened it and saw the uniforms of two Army Officers. Beradin closed the door. He said: 'What's this?'

'Sit down,' said Grundel. Beradin walked to his chair slowly, like a man in a trance. Kordov followed.

'Now,' said Grundel. 'Let us take the vote.' Beradin stared vacantly at the table.

'I propose Grundel,' said Hermann.

'I second that,' said Schmidt. Beradin failed to understand.

'Take the vote,' said Grundel.

'The vote,' repeated Beradin, his fingers straying over the pad, seeking the pencil.

'Are you going to allow this?' shouted Kordov, but Beradin did not even look round.

'The vote,' he repeated. Grundel and Schmidt raised their hands. Kordov licked his lips.

'He's ill,' he said. 'He's a sick man. He's not with us.' He looked at the determined faces opposite and the raised hands, then lifted his own.

'That settles it,' said Grundel. 'Now we must . . .'

Beradin started to laugh, softly, then he stopped.

'It had to happen,' he said. 'It happened to all the others, even to Herlich. But I lasted the longest. I held the post the longest,' then he started to laugh again. 'He who lives by the sword . . .' and laughed louder. He stopped and looked at Grundel.

'You'll be the next,' he said. 'You're on top now, but the wheel turns, and then you're at the bottom.'

'He's mad,' said Kordov.

'Mad?' laughed Beradin. 'I'm mad in a mad world. Is that

being mad?' The laughter peeled from his lips. Beradin continued: 'I can see it all so clearly, the ridiculous, the stupid, the insignificant position that man holds in the scheme of things, pretending that it's important, this meeting to decide who shall decide. Decide what? Who shall die first? Is that sanity? Count the minutes, hours, days, years and make the decision? How important? How sane? Decide what? Who should exploit? Did it matter who exploited? Oh yes! Overthrow the capitalists. But the exploitation continued. Then overthrow the revolutionaries. Then everything will be right.' He chuckled to himself. 'You'll be the next,' he laughed, 'someone will overthrow you!'

The telephone rang. Grundel picked up the receiver.

'Yes, speaking . . . right, General, take action.' He replaced the receiver. 'The workers are rioting. News of Herlich's death has leaked out.' He turned to Beradin. 'You are still Minister of Security. You still have work to do.'

'Still Minister?' asked Beradin.

'We are the Government, not hunted revolutionaries. Plotting and scheming was a means of seizing power, not of using it.' He stood up.

'We shall have to gain the approval of the assembly for the appointment we have made.'

Beradin and Kordov watched the others leave the room.

'You see what he's doing?' asked Kordov. Beradin blinked. 'He's playing us both along until the Party has ratified the selection. Wait till Moscow hears of this! Wait till I reach my telephone!' Beradin nodded without having understood Kordov.

He said: 'I have work to do,' and stood up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WILLI lit another cigarette and wondered how much longer Wolff would stay in the black saloon. The sun breached the horizon in the east and the moon was low in the west. The street lights for half a mile down the road switched off in series and Willi realized it was day. He

looked at his watch, six o'clock on a clear, cold, autumn morning.

Wolff sat in the black saloon and looked up at the second storey window of Schmidt's flat. He saw the curtains being drawn back. Give him half an hour to stew, he thought, and touched the car horn to make certain that Schmidt hadn't forgotten. He smiled to himself.

Willi saw the door of the black saloon swing open, saw Wolff step into the road and walk into the block of flats. He waited awhile then drew slowly nearer and decided to find out exactly what was happening. He nodded to the commissionaire and strode confidently to the lift, journeyed to the second floor and rang the bell. No one replied. He kept on ringing. The door suddenly opened. Willi looked into Kurt's face then beyond to the senseless Wolff stretched gracelessly across the floor.

'Well done,' said Willi, and stepped inside. 'Close the door,' he added. Kurt looked a little dazed.

'Is he dead?' asked Willi.

'I don't think so—not that it matters.'

The telephone rang. Kurt picked up the receiver.

'No,' he said. 'I've not forgotten. I'm just leaving.' The phone slid from his fingers. 'I'm due at a meeting of the Politburo in half an hour,' and glanced at Wolff. 'I can't leave him.'

'You go,' said Willi. 'Wolff and I have things to talk about.'

'You'll fix it?'

'You trot along,' said Willi. 'Comrade Wolff is in for a surprise when he wakes up.'

Kurt walked down the corridor, opened a door and looked in at his wife. She was in the deep sleep of exhaustion. She had heard nothing. At the front door he asked:

'You sure you can cope?'

'Go and do your job,' said Willi.

'Thanks,' said Kurt.

A cigarette later Willi looked down into Wolff's awakening face.

'Surprised?' he asked. Wolff frowned.

'Had a good sleep?' Willi asked. Wolff raised himself.

'You get around,' said Willi.

'So do you,' said Wolff.

'I followed you.'

'Since when?'

'Since you left Farice last night.'

'Alone?' asked Wolff. Willi smiled and shook his head.

'With Thorp?' Wolff looked at the bulge of Willi's hands deep in his raincoat pocket.

'We can talk this over—you're no fool.'

'You talk,' said Willi, standing with his head forward and shoulders slightly rounded.

'The Schmidts are friends of mine,' said Wolff.

'And Beradin?'

Wolff felt calm, as if he were in the next room listening to two other people.

'Willi,' he said, 'you're being very stupid. Beradin's the coming man. Can't you see where your interests lie?'

'There's more in this than self-interest.'

'You're wrong,' said Wolff, 'but then you're young.'

He climbed carefully to his feet.

'How much did you tell Beradin?'

'Look, Willi,' said Wolff, and moved one foot closer, 'Farice and the workers want to revolt. Beradin wants them to revolt. I'm helping them both.'

'You told Beradin . . .'

'He knew already. It's his business to manufacture revolts, otherwise he'd be out of a job. He started way back, tightening the screws. He started when the laws were made, when the industrial targets were fixed. This revolt's not the beginning of something, but the end—the end of a period of pressure.' He brought his feet together.

'You've worked for Beradin all along.'

'You can work for him too. You're just the type we want—but you'll have to forget all this nonsense about ideals. You're out in the big bad world now, where a man has to step on upturned faces to climb high.'

'We're going out,' said Willi. 'You can tell all this to Muller and Farice and Thorp. Convince them and you'll convince me.'

'I'm staying here,' said Wolff, and smiled. He measured the distance between himself and Willi. He wasn't quite close

enough. He took a clasp knife from his pocket and flicked open the blade.

'You're only a little man,' said Willi. Wolff stared wide-eyed into Willi's face. Deliberately and slowly he moved forward.

'If you haven't a gun,' he said, 'your number's up.'

Willi leapt forward. His hand reached with fingers crooked towards Wolff's face, masking the rise of his shoe. Every muscle contributed punch to the kick. Wolff tried to dodge but his weight was on the wrong foot. He collapsed with his thighs and stomach enveloping his groin and fell on the floor rolling from side to side wrestling with the agony. Willi slipped off a shoe and clouted the sobbing wreck behind the ear. He bent down, found Wolff's knife and put it away in his own pocket. He slapped Wolff's face.

'We're going out, remember?' he asked, and dragged Wolff to his feet and slapped him over the ear with the palm of his hand. Wolff staggered to the door. Twice in the lift Willi hit Wolff, once in the kidneys, once in the pit of his stomach. As the gates opened at the ground floor Willi called to the commissionaire: 'Give me a hand, will you?' He turned and thumped Wolff again. The commissionaire took one look at Wolff.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'He's ill,' Wolff opened his mouth, but Willi slapped him sharply. 'Wake up,' he said. 'I'm afraid of him passing out again.' Between them they lugged the stumbling Wolff to Willi's car. 'You might 'phone your chief and ask him to tell Beradin that Wolff's ill. I'm taking him to the City Hospital,' said Willi from the driving seat.

'But that's Maternity,' said the commissionaire.

'I know,' said Willi, 'he's having a baby,' and drove off. The commissionaire stood wide-eyed then ran straight to his switch-board.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

'THAT makes ten short of three hundred men,' said Farice. 'Twenty rounds and two grenades per man. If only we had mortars and machine guns.' Muller moved uneasily in his chair.

'Three hundred,' he said. 'It's not many.'

'It's enough to set the population aflame.'

'I wish I had your confidence.' They both turned their heads at a scuffling in the passageway. The door burst open and Wollf staggered in, followed by Willi and two of Muller's men.

'Look at him,' said Willi.

'What's gone wrong?' asked Muller.

'This,' said Willi, 'is a police spy. This is Beradin's right-hand man. This is Wollf, our friend who sold everything to Beradin.'

'My God!' said Muller.

'We can't stop now,' said Farice, 'we must keep this to ourselves.'

'And let the men walk into a trap?' asked Muller.

'We must fight,' said Farice.

'How much did you tell Beradin?' asked Muller.

Wollf smiled. This was the risk that had always been at his elbow. He shrugged his shoulders.

'He knows where and when we plan to strike,' said Willi.

'We can change our plans,' said Farice.

'Just like that?' asked Muller, 'when every order has to be passed by word of mouth!'

'I'll still lead the men who will follow me,' said Farice.

'Call the whole thing off,' said Willi. 'There'll be food parcels for everyone in the next few days and anything can happen now Herlich's dead.' He pointed to Wollf.

'This,' he said, 'told me that Beradin wanted us to revolt. Work it out for yourselves.'

'Count me out,' said Muller, then facing the blank wall, added: 'I'm going to pass the word to disperse. We've no alternative.'

'Give them a choice,' said Farice, 'tell them that I'm fighting on. Tell them to make for the sounds of shooting.'

'What do we do with him?' asked Willi.

'Lock him in the cellars,' said Muller. Farice walked up to Wollf.

'Where's Herr Graf?' he asked.

'In prison with the English spy—where you'll all be soon.' Farice turned to Willi and Muller.

'Can you let Graf and Granger rot in prison?' he asked.

'The West allows us to rot,' said Muller.

'That doesn't mean we should desert our friends.'

'We can do nothing now,' said Muller. Farice drew himself to his full height.

He said: 'When the hour struck you two were found wanting. God will punish you.' Then he marched out.

'Bull!' said Muller. 'Take this bastard into the cellars and lock him up.' Muller's men frog-marched Wollf out.

When at last they were alone, Muller looked at Willi.

'Farice may be right, but I only feel thankful that my men aren't going to their deaths.'

'If they don't follow Farice!'

'Aye,' said Muller.

'Have you seen Gerda?'

'Not to-day.'

'Before you go,' said Muller, 'do you mind if I ask you a question?'

'No,' said Willi, halting in his turn.

'Is that why you were against the riots?' then, when he saw Willi had missed his meaning, added 'to protect Gerda?'

'I want her to be my wife—is anything wrong with that?'

'It seems a very personal reason for opposing the riots.'

'Say selfish if you mean it.'

'You hold a position of trust. You're a chosen leader and a contact man with the West.' Willi faced Muller.

'I've never let you down. Not one of the men I conducted across the line was caught.'

'But you put her first.'

'My interest in her and the interest of us all coincide. Violence is against everyone's interest.'

'Against Gerda's?'

'Yes.'

'Against her father's?'

'He knew what he was doing.'

'He's still our leader—one of us.'

'He made his choice—he should take the consequences.'

'Will Gerda listen to reason?'

'She'll learn.'

'There are some things people can't learn, loyalty, love. Things that are born in them, gifts from God.'

'Or stamped on their infant minds before they can think for themselves.'

'Can you set the stops for love and loyalty, like some electronic calculation?'

'This is leading nowhere! I must find her before it's too late. Farice is a fanatic.'

'Fanatic, saint—it all depends how you look at things.'

'It all depends how certain you are of your own infallibility.'

'He certainly has only a one-track mind.'

'I wonder who set the stops?'

'And your own. . . .'

'Mine?'

'Would you follow Gerda no matter where she led you?'

'I love her.'

'But with discretion?'

'I love her.'

'The stops are set at love.'

'I set them.'

'Can you change them?' Willi frowned and looked away.

'When you were captured by the enemy during the war, had you any ammunition left?' asked Muller.

'I couldn't see. A blind man can't aim a gun.'

'But the stops were already set at courage.'

'To hell with it!' said Willi, and slammed the door, and walked down the street. But some of Muller's words had found a home.

Willi wedged himself inside the telephone box at the first cross-roads and rang the inn. 'Hello—Graf? Can I speak to Gerda. . . . She's out? . . . has been all day! . . . and you don't know where she is? . . . no, never mind.' He rang off.

He stood with his toes on the edge of the kerb watching the automatic lights change colour. An old newspaper flapped against his legs like a dying butterfly. He glanced down at the

dust-stained head-line, torn through Herlich's name. He kicked it into the gutter and crossed the road, aware that the streets were strangely quiet. A group of four men stood silently on the opposite side of the road and watched him walk by. Further on a shopkeeper pulled down the shutters over the secondhand goods in the window. Willi quickened his step, heading for the café where Thorp might be found. An empty bus raced on tight springs with the word 'Depot' on the destination roll. As he walked past the East End barracks he saw the flag flutter to half-mast. The guards outside the closed main gate wore black steel helmets over pale young faces. The imperative notes of a bugle leapt over the high wall. He wanted to break into a run.

In the main city street a newsboy trotted past a crowded radio shop carrying a large placard. Willi joined a group and bought a copy.

'HERLICH DEAD'

ran the black banner over a full-page photograph. Willi folded the sheet. His throat felt dry and his chest tight. Herlich, the superman, was dead. The tyrant with a Pharaoh's power, feared, hated, yet a symbol of man's glory, had died. What chance was there for the down-at-heel, shabby-sleeved, work-worn little man?

An awareness of the unknown forces hovering over the struggle of man against man showed on the faces in the silent groups reading every word or listening to the loudspeaker. Willi felt the thought flow from eye to eye, break down the solitude and link him with the group in common awe. Then each man's personality reacted, some treating it as an opportunity, others slinking behind the safety of barred doors. A few drifted aimlessly away from the silent circle, taking their section of the dread thought, patching the screens around it, forcing their eyes to look away outwards, but not beyond the tops of the solid buildings, trying to protect their illusions from the cold draught.

One minute Willi was walking along the broad pavement of the main street, the next he had disappeared down a narrow lobby between two high buildings. The entrance to the café was a door in a blank wall, propped open by a heavy green transparent glass brick.

The café was crowded with the profiteers of a non-profit-making society who kept the creaking wheels of a planned economy turning, who blunted the edge of sharp bureaucratic decisions, who spiked the gun of administrative justice, all for a percentage. The highest functions of human integrity were performed by the bird-eyed opportunists sipping Turkish coffee smoking American cigarettes, outcasts from a society that they alone humanized, at a price. Given time their sons would restrict entry to the trade, cloak it with respectability, establish rules, patronize the arts and marry chorus girls.

Willi sighed. He cut his way through the warm heavy atmosphere to a table near a bolt hole. He sat down by Thorp.

'The news is out,' he said. Thorp nodded.

'Anything else?'

'Muller has called off his men—I gave him Wolff as a present.

'Alive?'

'He was, just.'

'And Farice?'

'Nothing can make Farice change his mind.'

'And the Englishman, Granger?'

'He knew the risks.'

'He could use some friends now.'

'I've done all I can.' Thorp shrugged his shoulders. 'You've done all you can! Why don't you go home?'

Willi lifted his head and turned his right ear towards the door. A silence stopped all conversation in the room.

'Hear that?' asked Willi.

'Rifles,' said Thorp. 'They didn't waste much time.'

The noise of distant firing was drowned by the scraping of chairs. The café emptied quickly.

'And Farice has Gerda with him!'

'Oho,' said Thorp. 'Now I understand.'

'What the hell's wrong with that?'

'Nothing, nothing—do you need any help?'

'Not just now. I know where Farice is. He's attacking the big prison.' Willi stood up.

'Are you going there?' asked Thorp.

'I can't leave her . . .'

'There'll be a police cordon round the area.'

'I've no choice.'

'Nonsense. A man always has a choice.'

'I can't stay and drink beer in the safety of a cellar while she is one out there.'

'But you could when it was only her father and Granger.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FARICE drove the lorry along the road fronting the thirty-foot-high brick wall surrounding the big prison. He felt tremendously alive. Each breath he drew into his lungs was a complete experience. The colour, of the morning sky, of the autumn-tinted city trees, even of the soot-stained bricks and the greying slates, was a revelation of beauty. The steering-wheel rested under his sensitive fingers. He slowed down and turned into the high arched gateway.

Inside the lorry Gerda looked at the twenty men each with a gun and a hand grenade. They were all listening, some with muscle-ridged jaws, others with mouths open as if they were extra cars. She heard the gates creak open and clang against the retainer feet. Farice took the hand grenade from his lap, slid his thumb through the ring, pulled, leant his head and shoulders through the driver's window and lobbed the chunky iron bomb through the guardroom window. As the broken glass tinkled on to the flagstones the guard sergeant jerked his head up and looked through wide-open eyes first at the round hole in the pane above his head, then down at the floor where the heavy thing had thudded. A moment later a blast studded with metal clips flattened him over his desk, smashed out the windows, frame and glass, and escaped into the courtyard with a frightening roar.

Farice, shocked by the vicious power of the explosion, was slow in leaving the shelter of his cabin. The back of the lorry burst open beneath the flood of twenty men who raced quickly away in five groups, one to close the main gate, two into the shattered guardroom, three, four and five into the three main prison

blocks. Farice recovered quickly, pushed the impact of violence from his mind and joined the white-faced Gerda who stood watching four men loading guns and ammunition from the prison armoury into the lorry. A long-range gun battle between the watch towers and the invaders shattered the short silence following the explosion. Farice felt his jaw hurting, touched the stiff side muscles with his fingers and tried to relax.

'The keys,' said one of his men. Farice looked away from the broken-backed body of the sergeant of the guard, took the keys in his hand and started across the open courtyard. At first he walked. Then a spray of bullets flashed at his feet and whined away like broken violin strings. He blinked. His elbows tried to run away, but he still kept on walking. A bullet snatched the key-ring out of his hand, another plucked at his sleeve as he bent down to pick it up. The vast expanse of the courtyard looked as wide and arid as a desert. As his senses became accustomed to the assaults of noise, he picked out the smell of cordite in his nostrils and the excited shouts of the prisoners at the cell windows. He heard more firing from the high watch towers. Two of his men ran from the first prison block and led him into the building. Five guards stood facing the wall, hands held high above their heads.

'Do you want to join us?' asked Farice. One of them turned round, white-faced, frightened.

'How many of you are there?' he asked.

'Twenty,' said Farice.

'You'll not get away with it,' said another guard looking at the bodies of two of his comrades.

'God is on our side,' said Farice. The frightened guard could not meet the furnace in Farice's eyes. He looked at his feet, but the angry one laughed.

'God!' he sneered.

'May God castigate their souls,' Farice said.

'Lock 'em up. We've no time to waste,' said Rayder, Farice's lieutenant.

'Are all the prisoners freed?' asked Farice.

'All we can find,' said Rayder.

'Where's Graf?' asked Farice. Rayder shrugged his shoulders.

Prisoners poured out of the unlocked cells and crowded round

the doorway, some striking the guards, even guards unknown to them, with clenched fists. Farice saw the animal look of teeth bared in hatred, dismissed it as the mysterious way in which God worked His will, looked at the undignified postures of the corpses, and ignored the devil that rode men when violence was unleashed. Not all the prisoners had the strength to seize the guns that were thrown to them from the lorry. Some stood confused by the bright midday sun, others crept back to their cells like poor broken-spirited creatures who only wanted a few crumbs from the master's table, who were afraid to stray from his heel.

'Out into the street!' shouted Farice. 'Now we seize the city.' He stepped over a body, but the mob were too close on his heels to see it. In the courtyard Gerda ran up to him and shouted above the din.

'Have you seen my father?' Farice shook his head and tried to march past her but she clung to his arm.

'Have you seen him?'

'No,' he said. 'He is not here. Now you must come with us.'

'Has anyone seen Herr Graf?' she shouted, but no one seemed to listen. The crowd surged around her. She fought her way through a forest of groping hands, scratched and bit her way through the wild, freedom-drunk mob, calling, sobbing, 'Father, father,' all the time.

'Leave her alone,' a few voices cried and then she stood alone in the courtyard, before staggering to the nearest prison block. She broke the silence inside the corridor and rushed into the office before her courage had time to melt.

She stared at a chart on the wall, climbed a table and ran her trembling finger down the long lists of names. A shrill voice in the depths of the block started to sing and the echoes followed and mocked and laughed after the tuneless refrain. She searched the list a second time then ran out into the sunshine. From the streets, beyond the walls, no noise of traffic could be heard, only an occasional shot and men shouting and the crash of broken glass. He must be somewhere, she thought, and ran, her lungs screaming for breath, her legs aching with fatigue.

All the blocks were built to the same plan. At the third she hesitated before the list, half afraid to look. The names seemed to

be in alphabetical order. She saw Glatz, Goldmitz, then two spaces followed by Humboldt. She went carefully through the whole list, trying not to think of the implication of the gap between Goldmitz and Humboldt, but she could find no trace of her father's name. She climbed on a table and looked closely at the nameless cell 127. A duster had been rubbed quickly and carelessly and left traces of chalk in the coarse-grained black-board. She spelled out G r a . . . Perhaps she'd known all the time. She stood, weak at the knees, trembling for a moment, not even breathing.

'What are you looking for?' a strange voice asked from the doorway. She looked round and saw two deep-set eyes staring from a gaunt, shaggy-haired, stubble-chinned face. Two long limp arms hung by his side. He wore stained grey trousers and a collarless shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow.

'I'm looking for my father,' she said.

'Your father,' he replied in a voice that seemed too deeply emotional for his thin frame. 'Your father,' he repeated, eyeing her face as if she were some strange animal.

'Graf—his name was here,' she said. 'Cell No. 127.'

'I know where that is,' he said. 'Would you like me to show you?'

'His name's been rubbed out,' she said. 'What does it mean?'

'I don't know.' His voice had a rough, caressing quality that once might have been beautiful. 'I'll show you Cell 127.'

She climbed down from the table and walked to the door. He stood aside and as she passed, caught hold gently of her hand.

'I'll lead you,' he said, holding her hand at chest height, looking at her fingers. Her first impulse was to snatch it away, but his hold was so slight that she let her palm rest on his and walked at his side, hoping for a miracle, but doubting.

She looked at the numbers on the cell doors, listened to the hollow footsteps echoing down the corridor behind. Slowly they passed the fifty. The odd numbers were on the left.

♣ 'Let's go more quickly,' she said.

'I can't,' he replied, 'my legs are so weak.'

She looked into his face, at the moist grey skin sweating with the exertion of walking.

All the doors except one were open. She ran, unable to contain the anguish of foreboding in her chest, and flung open the door. The small cell was empty. She looked inside, even looked under the plank bed. Then she sat down and started to sob, harsh dry sobs which racked her body.

Farice led his men out of the prison into the deserted streets, heading for the city square and the Government offices. Of the eight hundred inmates only two hundred had been physically able and spiritually willing to join him. These had been divided into four groups, one of which he led himself along the shortest route to his objective, the Government offices. The second group protected the rear, and the other two moved along parallel streets on either flank. They had covered a quarter of a mile and seen only faces behind quivering curtains and dumb-struck pedestrians suddenly coming to life and darting like rabbits down the nearest bolt hole. His inspiring cry of: 'Citizens! Seize your freedom!' bounced off locked doors. A dribble of escaped prisoners slid away down side streets as the first elation of freedom simmered down.

'Look!' shouted someone. In the distance, travelling slowly and making a noise that blossomed into a roar, approached a machine-gun carrier leading a string of Army lorries. The rattle of caterpillar tracks made the ground tremble. The liberators stood still until Rayder bawled:

'Build the barricades,' and pointed to an abandoned lorry. The men scattered, some breaking into houses, preparing to open fire from upper windows, quelling the occupants by the fierceness of their eyes. Others found trucks, bricks, cars, and pushed, hauled and piled them across the road. Others found axes and hacked at telegraph poles. All this time Farice stood in the middle of the road in front of the growing barricade, feet apart, his hands folded across his chest.

The Army column stopped a hundred yards away. Guns on both sides were loaded and cocked, but an uneasy peace stayed the trigger fingers. Two officers watched Farice.

'It's a priest,' said the Captain.

'Give him two minutes to surrender,' ordered the Major, and climbed smartly back into the machine-gun carrier.

'We are your friends,' shouted Farice, 'we are fighting for your liberty as well as our own.'

Some of the soldiers looked at each other and lowered their rifles.

'Lay down your arms,' shouted the Captain, aware of rifle butts clicking on the concrete at his back, but not daring to look round, for he too had no desire to shoot a priest.

'Join us in the holy struggle,' shouted Farice, raising his arms, like Moses.

'We give you two minutes to surrender,' shouted the Captain, 'then we open fire.'

'Quiet!' shouted the sergeant-major to the murmuring soldiers at the rear. The Major sat alongside the machine-gunner, alternately watching the second finger of his complicated watch and peeping through the armoured slit at Farice. Then:

'Range, one hundred yards,' he said to the gunner, then: 'In short bursts, open . . . fire!' The gunman fiddled with his sights.

'Hurry up, man!' snapped the Major. Farice ignored the calls from behind the barrier, made no effort to seek shelter. He raised his left hand to the cross hanging from the chain around his neck, looked beyond the assembled troops to the distant sky-line.

'Farice, Farice, come back!' shouted Rayder.

'He's not moving,' said the gunner. The Major looked through the slit.

'Open fire, now!' The gunner looked through the sights at the black-clothed priest. His finger trembled on the trigger guard.

'No!' he said. 'No!'

'No? What do you mean—no?'

'Sorry, sir. No. 2 stoppage.' He whipped back the breach block before the Major could say anything.

'Firing pin's faulty,' he added. The Captain leant over. 'We're having trouble with the men,' he whispered in the Major's ear. 'That priest . . .'

'Trouble?' snapped the Major. 'Give me a gun. Once that rabble starts shooting back, the men'll have to protect themselves.' He picked up the machine-gunner's rifle.

'Let's try talking to them,' said the Captain.

'Captain!' said the Major. 'Get the men deployed.'

He stared levelly at his second-in-command, watched his features lose all expression, returned his salute, then raised the rifle. He saw the cross on the priest's chest glisten golden in the sun and took aim. The shot cracked, and the sound, short, sharp, dry, echoed between shop windows and high walls. Farice twisted as if a huge fist had thumped him on the shoulder. He crashed facing the other way.

'Cold-blooded murder!' The words cut through the silence. Many of the soldiers crossed themselves. They saw two men jump the barricade, lay down their rifles and turn Farice on to his back. They saw Farice raised into a sitting position, then after two minutes of breathless silence saw him lifted to his feet with an arm around the man on either side.

'I must speak to them,' said Farice.

'Let's get him behind the barricade.'

'No!' said Farice. 'We must go forward—I must speak to them.' He lurched forward and they kept by his side, supporting him. Others leapt the barricade and soon a line of ragged men stretched across the road, advancing slowly and silently, serious agonized faces, following Farice. The Major raised his rifle to his hip. The Captain strode to his side. Farice and the two men drew nearer, fifty yards, twenty-five. The Major took sight.

'So help me,' the Captain said, 'but if you shoot again I'll kill you.'

'Get back to your men, Captain. That's an order.' He took careful aim between Farice's eyes. The Captain knocked the rifle up and backwards over the Major's shoulder. At ten paces Farice stopped. He raised his hand.

'We are your fellow countrymen,' he said. 'Our freedom is yours. Our slavery, your slavery. Join us . . .' His words were indistinct. He coughed and his head dropped forward. He breathed slowly and painfully, then called: 'In God's name,' and looked over the soldier's head. His face seemed to radiate the reflection, the vision he saw in his mind's eye, a reflection which shone into the soldiers' faces. A handful of them ran forward to his side.

'I give you one last chance to surrender,' screamed the Major, but one of his own troops clubbed him with the butt end of a

rifle. Escaped prisoners and soldiers alike joined forces around the wounded Farice.

'Fellow countrymen—let us seize our freedom.' A great cry surged from four hundred throats; soldiers and rebels turned towards the city square and marched shoulder to shoulder, and as they marched their numbers grew.

Willi parked his car two hundred yards from the prison gates as the first of the counter-revolutionaries surged into the deserted road. He saw Farice, Rayder, recognized a dozen others, but caught no glimpse of Gerda or her father. When the last of the mob had cleared he drove slowly down the street, turned into the littered courtyard, passed the wrecked guardroom and stopped outside the first cell block.

'Gerda! Gerda!' he called. The only answer was an eerie wailing from inside the building that lost itself along the corridors. He stepped over a corpse, entered the office and examined the names on the board. He could feel his heart beating, squeezing the blood past the pressure points on his neck where his jaw curved up to the ears. As he turned to leave, a little man with a large head and big, wild-looking eyes stood in the doorway and started to laugh, high, wild trills, that ran like demons up and down the scale. Willi pushed him aside and the poor creature collapsed against the wall and started to weep and big tears rolled down his cheeks.

'It's the end of the world,' he cried, 'and I'm all alone.' Then, as if in prayer, he started to repeat his two times table: 'Two times two is four; three times two is six. . . .'

Willi ran into the courtyard. A few precious seconds sped into space as he started the engine. Inside the next block there was no sign of Gerda. He called her name but only the echoes answered.

In the office he saw Graf's name had been rubbed carelessly through. He searched quickly through a filing cabinet, found a green folder marked 'Disposal'. He flicked it open. Staring up was a printed form: Name. Age. Date of Sentence. Signature of Examining Officer. At the foot of the quarto page was Date of Execution and Certification of Death. No mention of a charge, judge, just the signature of the examining officer. No record of appeal. He examined the details. Graf was due to be executed.

Perhaps he already had been. He ran out into the corridor, listened and thought he heard a woman's voice. He looked up at the board, Cell 127, ran into the corridor and traced the odd numbers on the wide-open doors. He heard Gerda sobbing.

'Leave her alone,' said the tall, gaunt prisoner, his eyes blazing and fists trembling.

'I'm a friend,' said Willi, and brushed past as if the thin man had been a hollow-stemmed weed. The prisoner leant weakly against the wall, made as if to launch an attack, but when he heard Willi say 'Gerda,' and the expression of love in the voice, he closed his eyes slowly, passed a tired hand over his forehead, blinked, then stole away, lonelier than ever.

'Gerda!' said Willi, but she moaned and sobbed as if only her grief was real.

'It's time we went,' said Willi. She gained no comfort from his supporting arm.

'He's dead,' she said. 'I shall never see him again, never talk to him.' He twisted her round, dragged her hands away from her face and made her look at him.

'Pull yourself together,' he said. 'You're not a child.'

Frustration at his own helplessness and anger with the cruelty of man for man made his voice sharp. She looked at him, then sobbed into her hands.

'Don't be angry,' she said. 'I need you so much. You're all I have now.'

'You need me . . .' said Willi. She was turning to look because she thought her father was dead. But he might still be alive. . . . He kissed her, wiped her eyes, then said:

'We must go before they lock us in. From now on we think of us—nothing else. We seek our own happiness, put ourselves first.'

'I could have done so much more,' she said, 'now it's too late.' Willi frowned, then helped Gerda towards his car, slowly, oh, so slowly. He looked anxiously around, afraid of the unnatural silence of the battlefield, afraid of men recovering consciousness, seeking revenge for dead comrades.

He turned to Gerda, but her eyes were blanched of intelligence and her arms limp. I must tell her, he thought. She must make the choice herself.

'Your father might still be alive,' he said. He called down the corridor:

'Hey, you,' after the tall gaunt prisoner. When they caught up with him, he asked:

'Where do they keep prisoners awaiting execution?'

'Your father . . . ?' asked the prisoner.

'Do you think he might still be alive?' asked Gerda.

'It's a chance,' said Willi.

'Follow me,' said the prisoner, and led the way at a snail's pace along the corridor, down a cold damp subterranean passage-way full of shadows, studded with four heavy oak doors.

'This it?' asked Willi, and without waiting for an answer pulled back the heavy bolts of the first cell. The cells were unlit. The ceilings were too low and the walls of solid rock too hard for a cable to be laid without risking the prisoners cheating their executioner.

'Graf?' called Willi. Gerda stood in the dimly lit corridor, horror in her eyes at the thought that her father had spent his last hours there.

'Graf!' called Willi. But the first cell was empty. He glanced at Gerda and wondered if he was subjecting her to this torture to save his own conscience. He unbolted the next door. It swung back heavily on creaking hinges.

'Graf?' called Willi, his voice more hesitant.

A silence, then a voice croaked:

'Who is that?'

'Willi Rummel.'

'Willi!' the voice replied, 'they've caught you too.'

'Graf,' shouted Willi, and the noise of his voice crashed round the walls of the small dark cell. He struck a match. Gerda ran past him. In the pale yellow flame Willi saw a wreck of a man, barely recognizable as her father.

'Lift me up,' he said. 'What's happened? How did you get down here?'

'Let's get out,' said Willi.

'Open the other cells. The Englishman Granger is in one of them,' said Graf. Willi flung open the other cell doors. In the last one opened Granger crouched, unshaven, pale, his eyes wide as if he had witnessed a miracle.

'Willi!' he said, and laughed, his voice breaking, 'how did you manage this?'

'We can tell you all about it later,' said Willi, and picked up Graf and carried him up the steep, narrow steps. Granger staggered after them. At the top Graf said:

'Let me walk—give me your arm, Gerda.'

'Let him walk,' said Gerda. Willi lowered Graf but stood by his side.

As they hobbled along Graf said: 'Gerda, what has happened?'

Gerda avoided Willi's frown and answered: 'Farice is leading a revolt. Herlich is dead.'

'A revolt!' said Graf, straightening his back. 'A revolt! What are we waiting for?' His eyes grew brighter, his back straightened. 'Where are they fighting? We must go there at once!'

'You're going nowhere,' said Willi, trying to keep his voice calm and flat. 'You'd be more trouble than you're worth.'

'We're not running away now,' said Graf. 'Every man, woman and child is needed.'

'Don't be a fool,' said Willi. 'You'll do as you're told. If it hadn't been for me you'd still be rotting down in that cell.'

'I thank you for saving my life,' said Graf, then, withdrawing his hand from Willi's arm, tried to push him away.

'Gerda,' he said. 'Where are they fighting? What's their first objective?'

'Don't be a bloody fool, Gerda! You tried your best when you thought he was dead. If you take him to the city square, they'll either capture or shoot both of you.'

'Father, let's do what Willi says.'

'Run away?' asked Graf. 'This is the moment we've been working for!' He stood by the open door, blinking at the sunlight, sniffing the fresh air. Willi thought he saw a movement on the watch tower, but when nothing else happened, put it down to his imagination.

'Gerda,' said Graf, 'if Willi has lost his nerve we will go on alone.'

'No,' said Willi. The gaunt prisoner stood in the background, his large eyes looking first at one then the other, his lips trembling. Gerda shook her head helplessly, her eyes pleading with Willi, then with her father, then with Granger.

'Do you still love me?' asked Willi.

'What has love to do with this?' asked Graf. 'Gerda will her duty,' and walked unsteadily out into the courtyard.

'Come,' he said. Gerda moved after him.

'No! father!' she cried, 'don't go! Don't go like that!' saw a man's head raise itself above the parapet of the wall, saw a rifle barrel gleam in the sun.

'Come back,' he shouted and ran after them.

The shot crashed and echoed between the high walls frightened the sparrows. Gerda stumbled forward, first on knees, then on her hands. Willi cried with heartbreak and knelt down and tried to lift her but she was limp.

'Darling,' he cried. 'Oh, darling!'

'What, what was that?' she whispered.

'Let me lift you into the car.'

'I can't move,' she said. The expression on Willi's face frightened her. She wondered if she was going to die and realized that she wanted to live—that death and her father were on the same side, beckoning her away from Willi. She looked at the bright blue of the sky and saw it clearer and more beautiful than ever before, as if she was seeing it properly for the first time, as if the shot had 'broken a frosted glass window that had distorted everything.

'I love you, Willi,' then her neck muscles relaxed and her head fell forward. Willi's mind was incapable of believing, accepting, facing. No, not Gerda. He whispered, called, shouted her name, shook her, then he kissed her and held her warm cheek close to his.

Her face was calm, more beautiful than ever. Willi looked inwards, into his own soul and asked why this had happened. Was it because God was calling her to his bosom? Or was it because some bastard on the parapet had pulled the trigger?

'I'm not going to let it happen,' he said. 'She's not going to die. I'll make her live.' He looked at Graf, his eyes wide.

'I must go on alone,' said Graf, and started to walk across the open courtyard, without a backward glance.

'Come back,' shouted Willi, but Graf paid no heed.

Willi lifted Gerda into the car. A second shot blasted from the high walls, and punched a bullet through the side